

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

B: Lent 4

Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21

**10 March 2024
Salem, Bridgeport**

“With Jesus We Are Lifted Up!”

When we grow up in a particular religious tradition without direct exposure to other traditions,
we end up with a limited perspective on our faith.

I grew up in the Lutheran Church, worked at a Lutheran camp, went to a Lutheran college,
and worked in a number of Lutheran churches.

That’s one of the reasons I went to the interfaith Yale Divinity School,
because I was aware that it was important,
not only to be able to identify as a Lutheran from within Lutheranism,
but to identify as a Lutheran within a wider ecumenical context.

For years – actually for decades – I thought I had accomplished that.
After all, I had been at seminary with Episcopalians and Congregationalists
and Presbyterians and Methodists and Roman Catholics.

But then, 5 or so years ago, I was assigned to be a mentor to a Lay Licensed Minister
called Momma J, who came out of Pentecostal and Black Church tradition
which was part of a larger Christian tradition than I had experienced even at Yale,
a tradition that was outside the White Catholic and Mainline Protestant traditions.

One of the things that mystified Momma J
was this concept, this tradition, this practice of observing the season of Lent & Holy Week –
observing it in a somber way, reflecting on Jesus’ suffering and death,
as if we did not know the end of the story!

For Momma J, it seemed like we were pretending that we had never read the whole story,
or that we were simply performing one particular act of a longer play.

For Momma J it made no sense
to bury our hallelujahs, or stop our rejoicing, or cease our praises for six long weeks!

How could we do that when we know very well the end of the story
and when we should be giving thanks and praise to God every day for that?!

It took a long time for me to understand that in a large part of the Christian church,
maybe a third of it, people have never even heard of Lent, much less observe it.

And while some, however, do observe Holy Week, they observe it in an entirely different way than we do.

The Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, for example,
has more Holy Week services than I’ve ever experienced
even in high-church Lutheran congregations back in the day.

The most I’ve ever experienced in a Lutheran church has been Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday & Good Friday,
but the IMA’s Holy Week begins on Palm Sunday & continues every single evening through Good Friday.

They, like we, read the story of the passion,
but the sermons on the Holy Week texts are always preached in light of the resurrection.

There is no pretending that they don’t know the end of the story.

It’s not an historical drama, presenting one act of a longer play,
but instead, the crucifixion is always viewed in light of the resurrection.

And so, while they are focusing and reflecting on the suffering and death of Jesus,
they are also giving thanks and praise, not only for the crucifixion, but for the resurrection as well.

I share that with you, first, so that you will understand
that the Christian church is much wider and broader and more diverse than our own small part of it.
And I also share it with you because it has to do with today’s gospel.

Let me explain...

What's the most famous verse in our gospel reading for today (and possibly in the whole New Testament)?

That's right: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."*

The way that verse is interpreted and used very often focuses upon the crucifixion alone.

But that narrow interpretation does not take into context the words that proceed it in John where Jesus says,

*"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."*

Because when John uses the words "lifted up", he's talking about more than the crucifixion.

For John, Jesus was "lifted up" at his crucifixion AND at his resurrection AND at his ascension.

For John, these were not three separate events,

but one event with three parts that could never be separated, one from the other.

For John, it's not an historical linear procession through chronological time.

Rather, it's God breaking into our world, and interrupting time with a timeless event.

Think of it like our simplest Lenten food, the pretzel.

We don't focus on the flour, and then the addition of salt, and then the addition of water;
we simply eat the pretzel which contains all three!

Actually, John thinks of what God did in Jesus Christ has being a singular event,

not with just 3 parts, but with FIVE –

incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and the giving of the Holy Spirit.

None of those 5 things can exist without the other 4.

All are essential to the story. And none can be looked at in isolation from the others.

So John holds those 5 manifestations

of God's intervention into human history through Jesus Christ as one,

but the central 3 all have to do with Jesus being lifted up –

lifted up onto Cross, lifted up out of the tomb, and lifted up into heaven.

So what's the point? How does this make any difference to your life?

I believe it makes a difference because we, too, experience crucifixion and resurrection and ascension,
not as a one-time historical linear progression, but as more of a circular, repeating pattern.

What caused Jesus to be lifted up on the cross? The powers of evil.

While Jesus did not deserve to be lifted up on the cross, we do.

As Paul writes in Romans 3:23, we "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God".

In one of our traditional liturgies,

"we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.

We have sinned ... in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone.

We have not loved God with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves."

And in a traditional Ash Wednesday liturgy, *"we confess ...*

that we have sinned by our fault, by our own fault, by our own most grievous fault,

in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone."

Since the consequence of sin is death,

we find ourselves in a similar position to the Israelites in the desert,

and every time the enemy "bites" us and we find ourselves sinning

by our actions, or by our words, or even by our unspoken thoughts,

there is a consequence that brings some level of suffering and pain and death into our lives.

Sometimes, maybe most times, the consequences have to do with relationships.

We fail every day to love God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength,
and every failure separates us from God.

We fail every day to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Sometimes it's a sin of commission: we do something or say something that hurts someone else,
and the relationship is damaged, sometimes beyond our ability to repair.

And always there are our sins of omission:

in our failure to end racism, or provide economic justice for all people,
or prevent climate collapse, or stop gun violence and mass shootings, or end war.

It's sin, or these bites of the enemy, that caused the Israelites to become sick and die,
and it's sin, or these bites of the enemy, that cause us pain and suffering and lead to death –
whether physically or emotionally or psychologically or spiritually.

But just as the Israelites could look up at the serpent who was lifted up on the pole –
the serpent, which was the cause of their sickness –
so we can look up at Jesus on the cross, and see our sins which placed him there.

And because John makes it clear that Jesus was not only lifted up on the cross,
but lifted up from the dead to new life,

so we, too, by virtue of having been buried with him by baptism into death, can be raised to new life.

And that means that,

although there may be far-reaching and long-ranging consequences of our sin on a practical human level,
God stands ready to forgive, lifting the burdens of guilt & shame up & off of our shoulders.

And so in our sin we look to the one who was lifted up on a cross to be put to death along with our sin,
and then we are lifted up out of death and raised to new life.

But it doesn't end there.

Because for John, Jesus is lifted up not only in crucifixion and resurrection, but in ascension.

We, with Jesus, not only die to sin & are raised new life but we are empowered to do greater things than Jesus –
because, if you will remember, Jesus said he had to go to his Father
in order that he might send the Holy Spirit,
the Spirit which would enable us to do greater things than even Jesus himself.

So today on this 4th Sunday of Lent, as we hear John's words,
we are reminded to look beyond our sins and sufferings to our salvation,
beyond our trials to our triumphs, beyond our tests to our testimonies,
beyond our death to new life, and beyond the cross to the crown that awaits.

It's Lent, but do remember that the 40 days of Lent have never included Sundays,
because Sunday is ALWAYS the feast of the resurrection.

Whatever struggles or challenges you are going through today, know that you are not alone.

God who made you and loves you has a plan and purpose for your life that WILL be fulfilled.

Jesus who suffered & was crucified now reigns in heaven & as the great high priest makes intercession for you.

And the Holy Spirit is there waiting to pour into your heart
to enlighten, enable, and empower you to do all that God calls you to do.

It may be Lent, but you and I know the end of the story!

And it's a story so filled with the power and love of the amazing God we serve,
that if we truly get it, we can't help but rejoice!

And if you want to raise a hallelujah, go right ahead.

Because it's not just about Jesus' crucifixion,

but about his resurrection and his ascension and the power of all of those in our lives.

To God be the glory! Amen!