John 3:14-21

4th Sunday in Lent

March 13, 1988

I heard the report on my way to work yesterday. A group of black muslims is going on trial for selling out a house where crack was made and sold. A woman, whose voice and speech told me she was poor and black, told what their work meant to her. I can walk in my neighborhood since the muslims have moved in. The junkies and the crack dealers, the muggers and pimps, now they are the ones who are afraid.

Then I heard the voice of one of the leaders of the muslims. Why should the good people give up the streets to the evil. We fight so that the evil will not win.

And I thought to myself, Where are the Christians? Praying? Moving out of those neighborhoods? Worshipping in the suburbs?

When I got to work yesterday I looked at the text that would provide a great symbol for the muslims to rally around. The serpent on the pole. They could remember that old serpent who whispered to Eve in the garden, here's the best fruit all around, Eat it and you will be like God. He spoke and his smooth words brought with them sin and death and ghettos and crack dealers and their very and muggings. Yes the serpent on the pole. Imagine him with a nail pounded through his head. Dead. Able to do no more harm to the people. No more tempting them away from God, filling them with grumbling and complaining that God is not doing enough for them. The serpent nailed on a pole where he could no longer whisper that in Egypt the meat was more tender, the water colder and purer, the beds softer.

What could be a better sign for those who are gathered to win the world for God than this; The serpent on the pole.

Things are getting tough out there. The drug dealers have money, and automatic weapons. They are an army in our cities who write their own laws. And not only here. A week ago I read a Newsweek article that told of the situation in Columbia. Lawyers and judges and police who dare to oppose those trading in Cocaine end up dead. Or their children do. Columbia today. Cleveland tomorrow.
Now we have been sitting here a long time, thinking it was someone else's problem. Those poor miserable creatures who live on the other side of the river. But when it is our homes that are being robbed, our streets we travel with our doors all locked, maybe we too will be ready for the serpent on the pole. I'll tell you this much: yesterday morning my heart applauded those muslims. I want to see the serpent suffer, I want to see him nailed on the pole, dead where he can hurt no more helpless ones.

But when I was at work for a while yesterday, I turned the pages from the old to the new. The serpent on the pole is how it used to be for God, when he sent his armies into Canaan with the orders, "Take no hostages." God's people Israel took the sword after every enemy, and nailed that serpent on that pole. But there was no end to it. Until it happened to God's people just as it will happen to these muslims, "It became hard to tell whether they were part of the problem or part of the solution." Not just the Canaanites, but God's own people started to oppress the poor, and worship other gods, just as the violence of the muslims will in time become the evil that the very ones they now help will come to fear.

Yes, the serpent on the pole is the old. The new I read as I opened to the third chapter of the gospel according to St. John: And 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.

The Son of God takes the place of the serpent. That is the story you came to hear today. Jesus Christ, the only son of God, is nailed to the pole, lifted up just as the serpent was lifted up by Moses. Through him God has done what killing the serpent never has been able to accomplish, God has saved his people.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

It is hard even to imagine, that the final victory comes to God not by
nailing the serpent to a pole, but by the Son of God being nailed to
the cross. My heart tells me it cannot be so. The muslims have it right,
let us arm ourselves and crush evil utterly and completely. How else can the
victory be won.

Yes, that is what my human wisdom tells me. But the foolishness of
God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

So it is that we gather to worship under this sign. No serpent but
the only Son of God was nailed there. Not before condemnation, but for forgiveness
not as a sign of death and destruction but as the promise of life. We focus
our eyes here, on the cross, remembering what Christ has done, and what
he would have us do. "If any man would come after me, let him take up his
cross and follow me."

Yes, my heart screams, "But that is foolish." But God knows better than
my heart.

We believe. We have heard how when evil had done its worst to Jesus, that
God gave life to him again. We have heard how God intends to do the
same with us. We have heard that the last word will not belong to evil, but
to God and that last word will not be death, but life. We have heard and we
believe.

Believing we confess: For God so loved the world that he gave his only
Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

That is where this sermon ends. But instead of the amen, I want to add
a postscript this morning. Friday I received notice that a man is speaking
at Oberlin College. I do not know of him, though I have heard of him. He
is a black Lutheran pastor from South Africa. According to the reports
I have heard he is not the old way of violence, but the new way of following
Jesus through arrest and torture, very nearly through death.
I don't know that I will agree with his politics but I am going to Oberlin
tomorrow evening at 7:30 to listen to this brother in the faith who has
suffered. Who knows he may just help our hearts to believe in this foolishness of
God. Amen.