



## ST. MICHAEL'S SERMONS

Greenville, SC

Lent 4 – March 26, 2006

Numbers 21:4-9 & John 3:14 – 21

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### CURSE AND CURE

“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!”

Moses makes a bronze serpent, at the Lord's instruction, and sets it upon a pole so that the people who have been bitten may look at it and live. This bronze serpent invites the people to confront their sin, and in confronting their sin, they also confront their salvation! It is both curse and cure! It shows them the deadly poison of their sin in grumbling against God's grace: “We would rather be slaves and eat good food, than live in freedom on manna and quail!” *(It was the “Back to Egypt” committee! Every group of God's People has one.)* It shows them the deadly poison of their sin, and the determined passion of the God Who chooses them. The poisonous serpents bit the people, so that many died. The bronze serpent bites no-one, but tells the truth to everyone – the poison of their sin against God, and the passion of God's love for them. It is both curse and cure, inviting everyone to look up, and live!

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up!” The Cross of Christ is both curse and cure! It is curse, because it is cursed death by execution; because death is the curse which ends life; because death and the fear of death and the denial of death drive us to all sorts of un-holy and un-healthy behaviors which show us how truly separated from God we really are. It is curse, and it is cure! It is cure, because Christ's death completes His identification with us; because Christ's death destroys the power of death; because Christ's Cross “stands empty to the skies” and Christ's tomb stands empty to the shining sun; because the pierced hands and outstretched arms of the Crucified and Risen Christ still cross the chasm separating us from God and each other – and come to claim us; because once He was dead, and now His is alive!

The Cross of Christ is both curse and cure! It is still curse, because we so want to avoid the truth it tells we would do anything and everything. Prosperity theology is much more effective in growing large and successful churches. Give them what they want, and they *will* come. It is still curse – even sometimes for those of us already claimed by it.

And it is cure! Because it is the only cure for what ails us; because only the curse itself can cure us: Snakebite antidote is made from the venom itself! Smallpox vaccine is made from smallpox virus itself! The first of the twelve steps on which all twelve step recovery groups are based reads: We came to admit we were powerless over alcohol, over cocaine, over food, over sin. There are eleven more steps; each is important. But the cure begins with the curse! The poison of the curse leads to the passion of God, Who is the cure! “For God so loved the world!” Not just you and me; not just Lutherans or Christians; but the world!

“For God so loved the world!” It is the love, you see, that gets God in this fix in the first place. Love which creates us for itself; love which seeks to save us from our selves; love which gathers us into community, and into God! If God did not love us, God would leave us alone.

Because God loves us, God cannot leave us alone; cannot let us go; cannot let us down; cannot let us off! It is love which holds Christ to the Cross! Not the nails, but the love! "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life!"

Love is the curse and the cure for God! That's how it becomes the curse and the cure for us. And that's why this holy love must always be both curse and cure for the Church beneath the Cross . . . . For God so loved the world into which God calls and gathers, equips and sends God's Church! The Church not beneath the Cross cannot be the Church at all – is no Church – because it claims neither the curse nor the cure. The Church beneath the Cross lives with the curse and the cure; lives in and lives through the curse and the cure; lifts high the Cross as both curse and cure; stands up, stands up for the Christ Who once was dead and now is alive! "For God so loved the world that He gave . . . !"

Last Monday morning, when I took out the sermon folder for this set of readings, I saw a sermon I started and never finished – because it was three years ago I went into the hospital and stayed for ten days. That was both curse and cure for me. In the early seventies, when this neighborhood started to move away, this congregation under the leadership of its former pastor made a decision to minister to this community – and that's why we still attract the people we attract. It is both curse and cure, and it is the Church beneath the Cross.

Last week a letter arrived from a visitor who was here the day of our congregational meeting two weeks ago. He sent us a large check, but he sent us an even larger message: "Your math is all wrong!" he said. "The money you need to do the mission you believe God is calling you to do is God's money! And God has deep pockets!" "For God so loved the world that He gave . . . !"

The next day, our current shelter resident knocked on the door. He's a giant of a man, and very shy. He handed me a bank envelope, in which was a large sum of cash. I said, "What's this for?" He said, "It's for your church." I said, "I don't want to take bread from your children." He said, "You're not." I said, "What do you want us to use this for?" He said, "Just use it for your church; you have no idea how much this church has meant to me and my boys." I agreed to accept the gift, because I understand the need to give which God plants inside each of us created in God's image. "For God so loved the world that He gave . . . !"

The next day after that our immediate past shelter resident – 84 years old raising her grandchild – knocked on the door. She said, "My check just came. I always tithe. I decided to tithe it to all of the churches that helped us. She had been in the GAIHN program; she had lived in ten different churches. She gave us eight dollars. It was her gift. Curse and cure. "For God so loved the world that He gave . . . !"

On the wall in the hall behind you is a large copper cross. It stood atop the steeple of the first St. Michael's church building, right over there. It was lifted high by the fathers and mothers of this congregation. When I came here, I found it in a closet. When we renovated the worship space in 1992, we had it refinished and hung it in the narthex. It's still out there. You pass it on your way to the bathroom, you pass it on your way to the sacristy, you pass it on your way to the balcony to play bells or to the fellowship hall to eat lunch. And you pass it on your way back out into the world. It is there to remind us, each and every one, who you are, who we are. We are the Church beneath the Cross. Because "God so loved the world that He gave . . . !"

AMEN