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 Church of the Holy Faith
 Fourth Sunday in Lent
 Numbers 21:4-9; Eph 2:1-10
 Ps 107:1-3, 17-22,
 John 3:14-21

The Opposite of Love is Fear

What is the opposite of love? I'll give you a hint: the answer is not hate. The opposite of love is fear. The Right Reverend Robert O'Neill, former Episcopal bishop of Colorado explains it this way: "fear is the breeding ground – the simmering cauldron so to speak – of all the resentments, bitterness, anger, and destructive behaviors that constitute and give rise to hate."¹ Today's readings highlight these opposites: the power of our fear and the depth and power of God's love. When we admit our fear and accept the reality of God's love, our fears no longer control us. In the words of the First Letter of John, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."²

Approximately 3500 years ago enslaved Israelites made a mass exodus from Egypt and entered the wilderness of the Sinai desert, rejoicing and praising God for their liberation. Today's passage from Numbers demonstrates how quickly rejoice and praise can deteriorate into complaint and impatience. Despite having witnessed God's defeat of the Egyptian army, the Israelites sound like spoiled two-year-olds when they protest they "have no food and no water" and then state in the same breath they "detest this miserable food." But I don't think spoiled is exactly the right word. Their behavior is more likely the product of their fear. Fear the God of

¹ The Rt. Rev. Robert O'Neill, "The Opposite of Love: Fear," published in The Colorado Episcopalian, June 20, 2016, https://medium.com/@TEC_CO/the-opposite-of-love-fear-d38508f943d2

² 1 John 4:18

rescue has turned into the God of abandonment. Fear of being lost. Fear of the unknown. Fear of not being in control of what lies ahead. Egypt was miserable, but it was predictable. Enslavement was horrific, but it certain. Think of your own hardships and challenges, pains, and disappointments. It is a rare person whose trust in God's love and mercy is not challenged, even momentarily, by fear.

The wilderness wanderings repeatedly portray the Israelites as both holding God close and pushing him away. Total faith and dependence on God confounded by wanting to be in control. The Israelites shout for joy at God's love and mercy: they have liberation, manna, quail, and protective pillars of fire. When things go off track, however, they grumble, doubt, and create a golden idol. In response, God sends fire to consume their camp, plague, and in today's passage, deathly poisonous snakes. When the Israelites cry to Moses to intercede on their behalf, God again is merciful, directing Moses: "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." Seems a little bizarre, doesn't it? For the Israelites, to live in God's love they must look at the fear that separates them from that love. Their healing comes only after they paradoxically recognize the serpent as the image of their sinfulness, and, when lifted up and examined, it becomes the image of God's mercy.

In today's gospel, Jesus compares himself to that same bronze serpent, stating: "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." The phrase "lift up" translated also means "exalt." Jesus uses the paradox of the lifted serpent to introduce the paradox of the cross, although his meaning will not be clear until later. The cross is profound humiliation and defeat, yet through the cross Jesus is exalted. When we sing "Lift High the Cross," we

should hear more than crucifixion and suffering, we should hear resurrection, ascension, and glorification. We should see salvation and life.

Unfortunately, and simplistically, we focus on a singular verse in our gospel reading - John 3:16. John's gospel indeed proclaims God's deep love for the world he created. This passage, however, is not about simply uttering the words "I believe." Just as the Israelites played an active role in their survival by looking at the bronze serpent Moses lifted, so we are called to an active role in looking to Christ lifted. We are called to a response.

To convey the need for our response, John uses the image of darkness. We read in the prologue to John's gospel: "The light," meaning the light of Christ, "shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." The darkness, a reference to sin and evil in the world, cannot, and will not, overcome God's love and salvation. In today's reading we are confronted with a stark reality, though: we love the darkness. It is tempting to hear Jesus' words "the people loved darkness rather than light" as a third-party reference, as if Jesus is only referring to the opposition of his time. Whether in things done or left undone, whether in disobedience, arrogance, or selfishness, we like to hang out in the darkness. Our attraction to the dark, like the Israelites in the desert, is often fueled by fear. Fear in times of challenge and hardship that God is absent, or unloving, or even unreal. Fear of the unknown; fear of the stranger; fear of failure; fear of doing hard things; fear of death. Nothing results in spiritual and emotional paralysis more effectively than fear. Nothing obstructs our service as the hands and feet of Christ more effectively than fear. In these times, in times of doubt and fear, God calls us to look to Jesus lifted up. To receive the gift

of salvation found in Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, we must first acknowledge our need to face what obscures our view.

Today we celebrate Laetare Sunday, also known as Rose Sunday, also known as Refreshment Sunday. The word "Laetare" comes from the Latin command: Rejoice! Our penitential season is lightened. We turn, ever so slightly toward Easter and the joyful anticipation of Christ's victory. We do this in the church through vestment colors, music, and the words of our liturgy: shortly you will hear Fr. Robin say a different Eucharistic preface, inviting us to "cleanse our hearts and prepare with joy for the Paschal feast." Today is the perfect day to confront our fears and look upon Christ lifted up - not only in crucifixion - but in resurrection and ascension. In closing, I share another quote from The Right Reverend Robert O'Neill: "This is resurrection — our awakening to, and our coming to consciousness of, the depth and power of love — for there is no place, no crack, no crevice, no dark nook, in all of this life, where the unfathomable, unconditional, unconquerable love that God does not reach, and there is no place in which we are not already in the love that is God." Amen.