



Process theology sees the universe as creative, interrelational, dynamic, and open to the future. In process theology, God is relational, present in every moment of our lives and in all entities and levels of being. The world is interconnected, in effect a giant ecosystem, where what harms or blesses one, harms or blesses all.

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 15, 2015

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| Reading 1: Numbers 21:4-9 | Reading 2: Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 | Reading 3: Ephesians 2:1-10 | Reading 4: John 3:14-21 |
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By John Cobb

Today's readings begin with a strange story in Numbers. Anyone trying to build a coherent picture of Moses encounters a particular difficulty. Last Sunday we read in Exodus a strong prohibition against making any graven images. Today we read in Numbers that when the people were dying from snake bites, Moses made an image of a snake and raised it on a pole. When people were bitten by snakes, they could be cured by looking at this image.

Partly because it so brazenly contradicts the Ten Commandments, little is made of this in the rest of scripture, but there is one exception. The Gospel of John picks up on the idea that when the image of the snake is "lifted up," people can see it and be healed. He finds an image of Jesus being "lifted up" on a cross so as to become widely visible and to save those who looked upon him.

This scripture fits into the sequence of Lenten readings that trace Jesus own foreseeing of his death. John's understanding of how the crucifixion functions salvifically is quite distinct. It does not attribute a separate role to crucifixion from the role attributed to incarnation. Rather the death simply completes the work inherent in the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

The heart of John's imagery is light. That which enlightens everyone came into the world in Jesus. Those who love the light in which the truth about us is made fully visible, are attracted. Those who fear exposure prefer darkness and turn away. In order that the whole world be included in this experience of finding that the light has come into the world, it was necessary that Jesus be lifted up and thereby made visible. He then draws everyone to him. Of course, not all are attracted to light, but all who are have the opportunity to be illumined and thereby healed.

The contrasts with the snake are clear. The snake healed a particular disease among a particular people. Jesus heals the whole soul for all who will accept him. This move to the universal has been made by many Jews before Jesus time. It is present in the passage selected from the Psalms. Its presence among Jews for centuries prepared the way for Christian universalism. But in Israel, it remained one theme among others. Jews, including those who regarded Jesus as the Christ, remained deeply influenced by the assumption that the Christ would be the Messiah of the Jews.

Jesus himself began his ministry thinking this way. He initially dismisses the request of the Syro-

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Phoenecian woman because his mission was to the Jews. But he relented and became increasingly universal in message and practice. Paul gave the inclusion of Gentiles a systematic and foundational place in his theology. John, I think, assumes it. The question is only how the world as a whole can be made aware of the way that Jesus embodies salvation for all. John emphasizes that Jesus was “lifted up.”

John no doubt meant it literally, by tying it to the crucifixion. The prisoner is nailed to the cross while flat on the ground. At that point few can see. But then the cross is lifted up and the body hanging upon it becomes visible to all. John certainly meant this symbolically as well. By giving himself up to this brutal death Jesus made him visible far beyond the sphere of his recognition during his life. Over the centuries Christians have lifted up the cross quite literally to call attention to Jesus’ martyrdom. But of course the idea of lifting up Jesus goes far beyond this physical act. We lift up Jesus and his universal salvific importance whenever we testify by word or deed to the light he brought into the world.

John’s text allows us to make the crucial point also with less focus on Jesus. The light that was incarnate in Jesus had been in the world from the beginning. It took part in all creation and is especially present in the human mind. Whenever we lift up the truth, in a world that often prefers deceptions and cover-ups, in some small way we continue the work of Jesus. The question is “what is the truth.” The answer for John is that our norm and guide is Jesus. The question is not whether we name Jesus and point to the historical figure. It is whether we speak the truth as Jesus spoke the truth and live the truth as he lived the truth.

Last Sunday, Paul’s contrast in I. Corinthians was between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of those the world considers wise. Today in Ephesians, it is between life and death. Believers know what it is to be alive in Christ, and they know the difference between that and the death in life they had formerly thought was life.

For the early believers the contrast was clear. Over the centuries as the church entered the world, the world also entered the church. The truth could not be identified with church pronouncements which were increasingly bound up with the egos of Christians and their struggle for worldly power in and through the church. Sometimes the light seemed to shine more clearly elsewhere, and people seemed more truly alive when they rejected the church’s authority. It was harder to identify the truth with Christ, when Christ was used as a club with which to beat others.

In a tragic sense, the problem is clearer today. The dominant teaching of the world is leading to the deep wounding if not murder of the biosphere. It is darkness, and not light. It is death and not life. It rules the world now as it did through the Roman Empire, during the days when Christian communities were forming and finding light and life in Christ.

But there are also those who speak the truth. They call us to turn our backs on the wisdom of the world and adopt the path that at least has the potential to lead to life. As John saw, there are many who do not want to listen to that truth or bring themselves and their deeds into the presence of that light. They prefer to find success and wealth in the world of death.

But those who recognize the truth and seek to be informed and guided by it are growing in number. Many of them identify this truth with Christ. The teaching that the service of wealth is the service of death and error is rooted in Jesus and summarizes the truth that we hear now on many lips. The contrast today between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of truth and light and life should bring us back to the clarity of the early Christians. Jesus proclaimed that the *basileia theou* is at hand. Today many assure us that the way of *life* is at hand. They are one and the same. The choice is ours now as it was theirs then.

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