September 14th, 2025 (Holy Cross Sunday)

Texts: Numbers 21: 4-9; John 3:13-17

Pray

What is a Bank? (Financial institution or the edge of a river?)

What is a bat? (The only mammal that can fly or what a baseball player uses)

What’s right? (Is it one of your hands, or is it what your significant other always is… correct?)

The world is filled with words and symbols that hold double meanings. This is particularly important to remember today. September 14th the Festival of the Holy Cross. Today serves as an opportunity to reflect on the double meaning of the cross and the significance of Jesus sacrifice.

Many may already be familiar with the first meaning of the cross. Death, Defeat, Despair. Used by Rome as a means of gruesome execution. The act of Crucifixion, stripping someone naked, parading them through crowded streets, and then nailing them to elevated wood. Death could take days. Often as a result of asphyxiation, sepsis, or pure exhaustion. This slow means of capital punishment was meant to humiliate and foster fear in survivors. For example, there was a Romen Law that said if a Slave killed their Master all the other slaves in the household, the ones who didn’t do anything, they would be crucified. The Cross was meant to convey Rome will win, you must comply, for the Star Trek fans, resistance is futile.

Yet, our scripture readings this morning remind us of the double or other meaning. Life. We first have from Numbers a strange story from the Israelites time wandering in the wilderness. God led them from slavery into freedom but what follows over the next 40 years are stories of God’s chosen people stumbling and grumbling. The building of the Golden calf is one such story and this morning is another. The people distrust and show anger towards God. They are impatient about the journey so God sends not snakes on a plane but to the plain and the people who are bit die. So they beg Moses to help and Moses goes to God. God instructs Moses to put a serpent on a pole and then the people look up at the Bronze Serpent on the pole they will live. They are healed. They are saved. What was the means of death, snake, becomes the means through which they receive healing, a second chance, a new life.

Now we should not ignore that this is a strange story. This is one of those moments, where folks like to say, Oh that Old Testament God is just different than the New Testament God. I purpose that what shifts is not God but our experience, understandings, and even justifications. Nevertheless, when I read stories like this I am not searching for clues of its historical reality. Instead I invite us to consider what truths are told. Truths like people are impatient...people are distrustful…are those true for any of us this morning? How about the truth that in this story even though people go to Moses, God is the source of their salvation and God turned an Instrument of Death into an Instrument of Life.

Instrument of Death into Instrument of Life sound like something else?

The author of John knowing the double meaning that occurs in the story from Numbers and the double meaning of the Crucifixion says this… “And 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.” John is saying there is now double meaning. The Cross is no longer only a tool of terror, control and death. A tool of love, freedom, and life.

Instrument of Death into Instrument of Life. That’s exactly what one music teacher in Gaza has done. In a war that leading genocide Scholars are declaring is in fact now a genocide, Israel is not using a cross but drones. Which create a constant buzz over Palestine. Here was one teachers solution…

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtodtEKmYSE>

Ahmed says, “We don’t carry weapons — we carry melodies. We don’t spread hate — we spread love. We believe the world can be a better place, if only it would listen to the voice of art.” As he said in the video they are turning “The baddest sound of the war into something beautiful.” Showing us how an Instrument of Death can be transformed into an Instrument the gives Life.

As disciples, followers of Jesus here and now, the cross shows us where the world sees death we can and will find life. The Cross invites us to reject violence and power that seeks domination over all. Instead, we pursue sacrifice and service that liberates all. Let me say this again for this is my faith informed response to all the acts of violence we have witnessed recently, be they shootings or folks who stoke fears with their words, The Cross invites us to reject violence and power that seeks domination over all. Instead, we pursue sacrifice and service that liberates all. For we celebrate the truth that it is God who saves. God who has saved, who has extended and given abundant life through Jesus Christ not just in the next but here and now. Our cross is empty because this instrument of death is now a symbol of victory. A reminder that hope is never lost and Hope and God can be found in refugee camps, in a nation that has lost its empathy, and here in this sanctuary. For God “did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.” May we be instruments of life. Amen.