



# SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Sermon for Sunday, March 11, 2018

*The Fourth Sunday in Lent*

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

Today I want to talk about inoculation. Now what, you may well ask, has this to do with the readings we just heard from the book of Numbers and the gospel of John. Inoculation takes place when a weakened and denatured form of a virus that causes disease is injected into the body so that the body made develop immunity from the disease. The very thing that caused the problem now becomes the thing that ends the problem. What the readings we just heard suggest a form of spiritual inoculation.

The reading from Numbers takes place as the people of Israel continued on their journey from Egypt to their promised home in Palestine. It was a long journey filled with many obstacles and much frustration. They did not feel like they were getting anywhere. So they began to grumble, complain and indulge in self-pity. The biting sting of their self-pity probably stung as much as did the insect bites that assailed them. So they cried to the Lord and the Lord provided relief. By having Moses fashion a bronze image of the very thing that was causing them distress, God inoculated them. God took a weakened and denatured form of the very thing that was causing the pain and used it to allow the people to develop immunity from both the plague of insect bites and the sting of their self-pity. The people came to their senses and, as the Psalms tell us, each time thereafter whenever the people grumbled, they did not give way to self-pity but remembered what God had done for them. The inoculation worked.

Jesus picked up this image and applied it to himself in the reading from the gospel of John. Paul, in our reading from the epistle to the Ephesians, reminds us that we are as lost and helpless as the people of Israel in their wilderness journey. "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you lived, following the course of the world...following the desires of the flesh and senses, [you] were by nature children of wrath." But, God, who is rich in mercy and with great love, sent Jesus to take our place and die the death we deserved. Then God used the cross to inoculate us. Having defeated our sin, separation and alienation by the death of Jesus on the cross, God took a weakened and denatured form of the very thing that was killing us and used it instead to inoculate us. Like the bronze serpent that was lifted up in the wilderness, so the sign of the cross is lifted up for us. And, even today, we

still lift up the cross as a sign of our healing. The very thing that held us captive has now become a sign of our freedom. The very thing that defeated us has now become the sign of our victory. The inoculation worked.

Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, we receive a further booster shot of immunity. For the priest lifts up the broken bread and the spilled blood for us to see. The bread is broken like we are broken but now the very thing that caused us to be broken becomes a sign of our wholeness. The wine is poured out like our life is poured out without hope of healing but now the very thing that allowed us to bleed to death becomes a blood transfusion that restores us to life. The inoculation worked.

So why have been inoculated? What is God trying to tell us? There are three important words in this passage of John. The first important word is "love." John tells us that God "so loved the world that God gave the Only Begotten Son..." Even though "the world"—and that includes us—has repeatedly spurned the One who created us in love, God's love does not give up. The inoculation we have been offered is a gift of purest love.

The second important word is "belief." "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the [Human One] be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life..." But what does "believing" in Jesus mean? It does not mean accepting any set of historical facts or theological proclamations "about" Jesus. These may provide useful guidelines in our life but they are means to an end and not the end itself. Nor does it mean believing "in" Jesus. A living relationship with Jesus is necessary in any attempt at a life of faith. But again, such a personal belief can only be a means to an end and not the end itself. To believe in Jesus means believing in the work that Jesus came to do. This sort of belief has more to do with our outward actions than any personal, inward relationship with God. The question this reading faces us is this: how willing are we to engage in Jesus' quest to end the hate, inequality, oppression, exploitation and alienation that fills our world as a result of our corporate and structural sin and replace it the original goodness of God's creation. This is why we have been offered inoculation.

The third important word is “judgment.” “This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world and the people loved darkness rather than the light...” Usually, we only think of judgment as something that happens at the end of time. Usually, we think we can respond to God’s offer of love by saying: “Thanks for the offer. I will consider it at a later time and get back to you.” But all of the parables Jesus left us say exactly the opposite. A merchant finds a pearl of great price in the marketplace and immediately sells all he has to buy the pearl. A woman loses one of the ten coins that constitute her assets so she drops everything she was doing and immediately searches for it until she finds it. A man is beaten and left for dead on the road to Jericho. Three people see him there but two do nothing while the third immediately binds his wounds and takes him to an inn.

The moment we accept the inoculation of God, judgment happens. We pass from sickness into health. The moment we believe in the work Jesus came to do and adopt it as our own, judgment happens. We pass from darkness into the light, from death into life. We are called, as the disciples were called and as every generation of Christians ever since has been called to decide who we are, what we stand for, whom we will follow and to whom we will give our allegiance. This is why we have been inoculated.

In the words of the well-known hymn: “Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim until all the world adores that sacred name.” For the one who was lifted high on the cross, in humiliation and defeat, is also the one who, because of this, is now also lifted high in resurrection and ascension glory and given the name that is above all other names. Paul reminds us in our Epistle reading that we who have been inoculated by the death of Jesus, are now, because of that inoculation also “raised up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places...”

So let us get on with the work Jesus calls us to do. Amen.