

**Reflection on the Gospel-4th Sunday of Lent Year B
(John 3:14-21)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The gospel for today is the concluding section of Jesus' conversation with a Pharisee called Nicodemus who comes to him "by night". It features a number of typically Johannine themes: life, eternal life, believing, seeing, God's love, salvation, judgment, light, darkness, the world, truth. John loves to play on words. Without losing sight of the material reality underlying each image, we need to keep asking: how is this word or expression to be understood in this particular context? In John's gospel, the characters often misunderstand and this gives Jesus the opportunity to lead his hearers to a deeper or different understanding of his words.

As 21st century readers, we operate out of a symbol system that belongs in a different time and a different place. Hence the need to explore the traditions informing the stories. The first two verses of today's reading evoke the ancient Israelite tradition of the bronze serpent (Numbers 21:5-9). According to the story, the Israelites are unhappy with their lot in the desert. They complain about the food or lack thereof. They blame both God and Moses. Their situation worsens with the outbreak of a plague of poisonous snakes whose bite has killed a considerable number of them. The people interpret the plague as punishment for their sin of speaking against God. They ask Moses to intercede with God. God instructs Moses to make an image of a fiery serpent and set it on a pole: anyone affected by snakebite has only to look upon the image to find life and healing. And so it happens: the bronze serpent is lifted up and those who "see" or "look upon it" find life.

Life and death, seeing and believing in God's love and mercy are at the heart of the story of the bronze serpent. The gospel writer taps into the collective memory of the emerging Christian community: just as the serpent was lifted up and the people found life, so will Jesus be lifted up and those who believe in him will find life. In John's gospel, seeing is often equated with believing and believing leads to "life".

The bottom line is God's saving love for "the world", for the whole Earth community, human and other-than-human. Most of the themes in this passage have already been introduced in the prologue to the gospel. Here for the first time in the gospel, God's saving activity is expressed in terms of "love". God's love is explicitly related to the gift of Jesus, God's Son, for the salvation of the world. Salvation resides in acceptance of Jesus while judgment is the refusal to accept Jesus as the revelation of God. Later in this gospel (12:33), Jesus will again reference the bronze serpent story in an expansive embrace of all creation: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself."