

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

What we can Learn from the Story of the Bronze Serpent

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Hello. My name is Sister Faustina with the Sisters of Life, and today we're going to talk a little bit about the story of the Bronze Serpent, and God's healing love and power in our lives. Let's start with a prayer.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Father, thank You for the gift of being on a journey, a journey to return to You, our heavenly homeland. Thank You for Your presence along the way, and we ask, Lord, with a tremendous openness to Your healing love, the places in our hearts that most need to be healed for the light of Your love to reach into and transform. We entrust ourselves to You anew this day. We believe in Your power. Make us vessels of Your life and Your love. Amen. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So today, we're going to briefly touch upon the story from the Old Testament, the book of Numbers, about the Bronze Serpent. Just discuss what that story was about, and what was so significant about it. And also, because St. Therese loves to crash every good Catholic party, we're going to take the initiative and actually invite her in and see what her teachings on the Little Way, the Little Way of Love, how they cast new light on this millennia old account, okay.

So, a few years back, I was living in the Bronx and I went next door with a bunch of our sisters to the parochial school, and we were having lunch with the Pre-K and the Kindergarteners and, you know, talking about lunchboxes and superheroes, you know, and trying to make conversation with them. And then, all of a sudden, one girl across the table, you know, was asking about why do I wear this thing on my head. And everybody got quiet. They wanted to hear the answer to that. And I said "Well, I don't know if you've ever been to a wedding, but when you see a bride and a groom at a wedding, a bride wears a veil. I wear this because I am the bride of Christ."

And this little girl from across the table slams her hand on the table and she says "He chose you?" Thanks for the vote of confidence. It was really striking. This little girl at this young age knew how special it was to be chosen. And it really invoked this wonder that isn't this true, not just for, you know, priests or sisters, the religious that have been called to live this kind of life, this is the truth for every human heart. That God had no need of us, but He chose us and He created us, that He breathed His very life into us. He said "I want you to exist. I desire your love to

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

be seen in the world. To taste your love, that only you can give.” Each of us is deeply known and longed for by God. This is the truth.

And as we begin to talk today about the Old Testament and some of the stories that we hear there, it’s good to remember that the Old Testament is the history of Israel. Israel is the chosen people of God, and this is the story of God revealing Himself to them, but also their story of coming into relationship with Him. It’s good to think too about how, when we read the Old Testament, that it’s not just, like, that story that happened a long time ago, that’s someone else’s story, but actually it is our story. This is my story. You know, the things that we read about are actually, on an external level, showing these triumphs and these struggles that we have on an interior level. That when we read the Old Testament, we ask the Lord to light up our hearts, to reveal to us the truth that He wants to speak to us. What are our struggles, right? This is my story, that God parted the Red Sea for me, so that I could cross over to Him. I know when that happened in my life, and He does it for each of us. So this is our story.

So let’s read this passage and kind of look upon this with those eyes. This is our story, to be with Him now and forever. So, looking at the Bronze Serpent. So this is one of the oddest stories in the bible I think. Maybe Jonah and the whale, in the belly of the whale, that might beat it. But this one is pretty, pretty, maybe obscure, but it’s not insignificant, because Jesus actually references it twice as He’s speaking and preaching. Which, and, you know, since it’s particular enough we might be lucky enough to remember what He’s talking about.

So the Israelites had been freed from slavery, right, in Egypt, and they crossed through the Red Sea, and they’re on this long journey through the desert, you know. “Are we there yet?” We have all been there in some degree. But they start to complain not just about things, but they start to complain against God. And so God, you know, seeing that, He sends serpents as a punishment. And some of the serpents bite the Israelites and, as a consequence, some of them die. And they start to recognize their sin and the way that they’ve turned from Him, and so they pray and they plead with Moses and with the Lord to say, you know, “Take away these serpents. Like, have mercy on us. We recognize our sin.” And God has compassion. Yet, He does not take away the serpents. What He asks Moses to do is take a bronze, make a bronze serpent, mount it on a pole and lift it up, that anyone who has been bitten, by looking upon this serpent, would be healed. It’s fascinating.

So a couple of things are clear from this. First, that the wages of sin are death. St. Paul tells us that. That there’s real consequences from turning away and distrusting not only the path, but Him who is leading us on that journey. There are real

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

consequences. Secondly, that God wants His people to be healed. Anybody who looks upon this serpent will be healed that is accessible to all. And it's not just for the priests or the wealthy people, but for everyone. He desires us to be healed. This is His merciful heart. He is a merciful Father, and His healing is His mercy, His love for us.

And lastly, and maybe most importantly and beautifully, I think what's clear here is that God wants His people, who He has chosen, He wants them to choose Him back, choose Him in return. Like we have mentioned before, this is God's chosen people, and all throughout the Old Testament He's referencing, you know, that "This is the people that I've chosen for My own. That you will be My people, and I will your God," throughout the various books of the Old Testament. And it was quite an impressive escape that they made: All the plagues that kind of loosened Pharaoh's grip, and then this, you know, the sea parting, coming through.

And it was so forceful in a way. He didn't want to force it upon them, but here they were on their way to this chosen inheritance, a land that would be fruitful, full of milk and honey. And yet there's a really, really big catch here: The God who had chosen them, who had been lavish in loving them, who had taken the initiative, was waiting then to see if they would choose Him back. That they would love Him in return. And that decision would come through trusting the way, and that He would provide for them. That He loved them, and wanted more than just a journey, but a relationship.

We met a young woman, Jenna, who came to us, and she was pregnant, and going to her family and to the father of the baby. They had given her the money to get an abortion in full, and she had had an abortion a year prior and really regretted that. So she was very much uneasy about this, didn't know where to turn. And so we talked to her on the phone, but it was still really difficult, and so we offered for her to speak to a couple of other women that we have served in the past that have been in similar shoes as her.

And one of the women said something really beautiful to Jenna that caught her heart. And this young mom said to Jenna, she said "God chose you for this baby." She was chosen for this child. This child was chosen for her. That hit her to the core. And so Jenna was able to make this beautiful choice for life, to choose [ch 8:29]. And yet, you know, several months down the road, you know, she was really excited to find out she was having a girl. But then I had found out at one of our appointments that her blood tests, other news. The doctors sat her down and said "I just want to let you know that your baby has spina bifida, which is a very serious condition." And kind of telling her how hard it would be to raise a child with these special needs.

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

And as Jenna listened, you know, she was listening and he said “Well, what are you going to do?” And Jenna could hear the kind of insinuation of what he was saying, and she said kind of fiercely “I’m going to be a good mother, that’s what I’m going to do. And if my child has spina bifida, it’s my child.” And she walked right out of there, end of conversation. She was able to make this beautiful choice for life, you know, when we weren’t even around. You know, no one was there. She knew she had been chosen, and that she could choose in return this love, a relationship that she was building on. So beautiful. And then she actually offered to us, she said “If there’s anybody else that needs to talk to somebody, I want to be the person you call on.” I think we gave her 2 weeks. And yet that love was a love that, in her receiving it, she showed us back. That made her heart flourish into a deeper relationship.

So the power of our choice is the gift of our love, you know. That He has given us circumstances in our life that actually leads us. And so when we say yes to them and His will in them, that He’s leading us not only on closer to the promised land, but deeper into relationship with Him. So how do I choose Him return? And this is where we come to St. Therese and her Little Way. So, St. Therese really [chk 10:18] the universal call to holiness. That deep union with God is the call for each of us. Not just the prophets or for Moses, but for everybody, right.

And a lot of people love St. Therese, and they love her Little Way, and they might describe it as doing little things with great love, and that’s true and beautiful and I like that. But that easily peters out after 10 minutes, putting all the love I can into this little thing, and then somebody comes along and thwarts our plans, we have a conniption, things don’t go our way, and this little way of love seems as distant as a poem, you know, in a book somewhere, and we say “What is this?” You know. “I don’t want to merely, you know, have a passing resolution to live this love of holiness. I don’t want to be inspired by, you know, a nice quote on a mug, I want to live it. I want to live this way of holiness.” What is it really that St. Therese is talking about?

And many have summed it up in the words “Spiritual childhood.” Which for me, at first, did not sound attractive - it brought to mind this lack of maturity of love and freedom. And so I had to really grapple with that. But as I read more about it and prayed more about it, my hesitations were kind of flipped upside down as I came to see that this is actually the path to the deepest love and an unbounding freedom. St. Therese was well aware of her littleness, this real need for God, and the power of accepting that dependence and really leaning into it. And she, yeah, even as she, you know, matured in her spiritual life, this dependency was a real hallmark of her life.

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

This did not discourage her from seeking holiness, but it actually propelled her. She said “I want to seek out a means of going to heaven by a little way. A way that is very straight, very short, and totally new.” Don’t tell the Israelites the shortcut. This little way, she would kind of refer to it in terms of an elevator. This little way would be an elevator of sorts, since she was too small to climb the rough stairway of perfection. And St. Therese, she would pray, you know, by standing not, you know, she was [chk 12:31], but she would stand [chk 12:32] the stairs, lifting her little foot, and she would pray to be lifted up by Jesus. That this elevator would be the arms of Jesus that [chk 12:40] her. So, at the bottom of the stairs, He would come and carry her up Himself.

And this is my favorite part. That if we truly know what St. Therese is asking, we know that it is far from a childish request. It is the boldness of a [chk 12:55] that she is praying in this way. Why? Because in the third chapter of John’s gospel, we read Jesus’ words, who says “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Son of Man will be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.” And just a few chapters later, in John’s gospel, again the Lord references it and says “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am.” And many people came to believe in Him through that.

So being lifted up is actually the way Jesus refers to His death on the cross. His total gift of love to the Father. This union of love. So was this in fact Christ’s very own prayer to the Father? “Lift Me up. I’m a Son dependent on You for everything. Father, I desire to live the total gift of My love, to pour out My love for You, for Your children. But I surrender myself precisely in the circumstances that You provided for Me, the path that You’ve chosen, and work Your wonders of Your love through that, and this gift of My love. Precisely there.” You know, I do not choose my struggles, my crosses, right. You know, but am I convinced that in my everyday life God is offering me real holiness, a real opportunity for beautiful love precisely in them.

You know, there’s these deep seeds of greatness within us, and yet we’re not capable of living a love that we were made for, that we desire. You know, and by really believing that this self-giving love has the power to work through the ordinary and maybe unattractive crosses in my life. This, this is the power of the cross, of His merciful love that is poured out for us on the cross, and that transforms these places. That, when we look to Him in those places, He alone can heal us, and it’s accessible to each of us by reaching out to Him. Are we willing to be seen in that place of our poverty, of our failings, of our, you know, of our neediness or dependency? You know, to reach out to Him there. To turn to Him with our hearts, you know, in the sacraments and adoration, the Mass, you know. Maybe when we least feel like, to surrender to Him, to believe in His love for me

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

there, to know that childlike dependency and trust is actually the path of life. This little way is a beautiful way and a deep way of love. The way that St. These has is not childish. It is... it's bold.

So we are all on a journey to the Promised Land. We are no longer slaves. We are free. We are children of the Heavenly Father. And yes, this journey, maybe it will take 40 years, maybe more, maybe less. This journey will demand something, the heart of us, but something beautiful that we were made to give: this gift of our love, this gift of our trust, our surrender to God. And in choosing Him, we come to know that the gift of His love is enough, and is more than enough. The fullness of life starts when I begin to choose the love that has chosen me.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Lord, we come before You in our littleness, precisely where we are, in the midst of our life, in the midst of our unfulfilled desires, the crosses that seem to weigh heavy on us. We ask You, in the power of Your cross to come in, to lift us up, to lift us up, to live the love that we desire precisely here. This little way that is accessible, that sees us, that wants to heal us, lead us home to the Promised Land, but also to deep union with You. We ask all this confident and trusting ourselves to Your mercy, and in Your holy name, Jesus. Amen. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.