

## Like a Snake on a Pole

John 3:5-18 (11-16), Numbers 21:4-9

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Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, isn't until next week, but what you are about to hear is a very Lenten message, which makes it very appropriate for today's communion service and good preparation for the coming season when we are supposed to reflect on why the Messiah had to die.

While I was a pastor near there, the Church of the Covenant in Washington, PA, - a Presbyterian Church - commissioned a larger than life "crucifix," placing it in the front entry hall, requiring people to first walk around and then behind it in order to enter the sanctuary. Beneath this image of the crucified Christ, you can also see a desperate man and woman looking up to Jesus, surrounded by snaky looking roots going down to the ground - and though not seen in this photo - there is a single green leaf sprouting from the base of the cross. Many people were scandalized, asking why a protestant church would display such a dramatic image of Christ nailed to the cross. Today's scripture lesson can explain not only this imagery, but also why a very evangelical Presbyterian Church wanted people to see and be reminded of the death of the Messiah every time before they entered worship. For that explanation, let's turn to today's Scripture text.

First, you will have noticed in the middle of today's passage, *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life."* Here is perhaps the most beloved verse in our entire Bible, telling us that God sent His Son into our world to save us. But perhaps its prominence in our thinking - like an overly bright light - has blinded us to what Jesus said immediately before this verse.

Remember, this story began with Jesus telling the very religious Nicodemus that he had *"to be born from above"* if he ever wanted to enter the kingdom of Heaven. Confused, Nicodemus wonders *"how can a person be born a second time?"* Here was the answer that Jesus gave....

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 3:14-15

In short, our second birth comes from believing in Jesus, but why did Jesus then tie this act of faith to a particularly horrible event which happened to the people of Israel during their forty year sojourn in the wilderness? (Numbers 21:4-9). What might be the connection between Moses placing a serpent on a pole - so that those who were snake bitten might look and live - and Jesus dying on a cross, so that we might not perish? Let's turn now to this strange little story of serpents in the wilderness to look for our answer.

First we need to remember the bigger story to which Jesus was referring, of Israel's 40 wilderness years between leaving Egypt and entering the Promised Land. These are the people who have personally witnessed God's finest hour up to this point in history.

- They remembered being slaves in Egypt. They remembered all the miracles that were performed to get them out of Egypt--all the plagues that touched Egypt and not them, and the first Passover where the Angel of Death took the firstborn of every home in Egypt, but passed over the Hebrew homes and left them alive.
- These were the people who watched the waters of the Red Sea part and who crossed over on dry land only to see the Egyptians drown behind them.
- These were the people who stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai, heard the voice of God from the mountain and received God's law. They heard God promise to be their God and to make them His people... and they promised to obey God's commandments.
- These are the people who saw God's continuing presence visibly leading them through the wilderness by a great cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.
- And these are the people who saw God provide for them whenever they complained...which was a lot.
  - We're hungry, they had griped...so God sent manna...a miracle food that appeared every morning for them to gather.
  - We are thirsty, they complained, so God gave them water miraculously from a rock.
  - They got bored with the manna and complained again, so God gave them quail.

God had done all of these things, and yet there was no gratitude, only complaints. They never said, "*God, you have already done so much for us and we are grateful. We know we can live on whatever you provide, but we find we are thirsty all the time and we would really like more water.*" There was never humility in their asking, they never even asked. Instead, the people complained against God and against Moses!

Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.'

Numbers 21:5

Notice however, that they even admitted that they actually did have food, they just no longer liked what God was giving them.

God had already put up with such complaining from Israel many times before and now they were starting again. But, this last round of complaints finally put God over the top; He responds with a plague of poisonous snakes, biting and killing them out there in the wilderness. We tend to be horrified at the thought of God actually punishing people this

way; but if it had been up to me, I probably would have sent the snakes long before this.

The God at this point of the Exodus is a God who has had enough! A God who has given, and given, and given, without receiving the first bit of gratitude in return, let alone obedience. There is a way in which I can relate to God's response; I think all of us who have experienced parenthood can. But what can we learn from this story? Try God's patience a bit too far and get poisonous snakes as a result?

First we should learn that God is not a tame bit of milk toast, Who will do whatever we want. God does get angry, and God doesn't like being pushed around or being taken for granted any more than we do. It doesn't hurt every now and again to remember Who it is that we're dealing with. The poisonous snakes had exactly that effect on the people.

The snakes wake them up and they realize this is punishment. Not everything bad that happens is punishment from God, but this time it most surely was, and they knew it.

They also knew they deserved this. None of them says, *"God is so awful, look what God has done to us innocent people."* Nobody charges God with wrongdoing. When the snakes show up and people start dying, they say, *"uh oh, we've done it now,"* and they go to Moses, admitting that they were wrong to complain against him and God, asking him to pray for their forgiveness

This is the appropriate and faithful response to God's wrath. To repent as they did shows that they knew that God was just and would not give them a punishment they did not deserve. To ask for forgiveness also showed their faith that God is not only just, but merciful.

They ask because they know it is in God's nature to forgive. That is how the faithful respond. So, the people ask Moses to pray that God might take away the snakes, which Moses does.

**However, God's answer was not to take away the snakes, but to provide a way for people who were bitten by the snakes to be healed.** Moses is instructed to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. From then on, whoever got bitten had only to look at that bronze snake to be healed and live. It seems like a weird solution, but it shows a lot of God's wisdom.

Think for a moment about what the Israelites had requested: *"please take away the snakes?"* Given what we have seen of Israel in the story so far, what do you think are the chances that when the snakes were gone they would remember the incident so vividly that they would not complain anymore? The chances were...nil. This is not the first incident of punishment. Remember the affair with the Golden Calf, when God sent

a plague. Or, when Korah incited the people to challenge the authority of Moses and Aaron; 14,700 people died. But none of that seemed to change their behavior. If God just took away the snakes from the people here, it would be just like it had never happened and they would go right back to their old ways.

So consider God's solution. The snakes stay; and they stay poisonous; and the snakes continue to bite people. But God now provides a way for people to survive the bite and live; which, by the way, is merciful. You may not agree, but I think God has every right to send poisonous snakes or a plague or whatever else He deems necessary to remind us of our relationship with Him. God is God and we are not. We forget that sometimes.

What I find amazing is not God's harshness but God's mercy. Why the human race has survived this long after all the atrocities that we have committed both against each other and against God is way beyond my comprehension. God has had ample reason to wipe us all out, like He did before with Noah, and almost did again to the nation of Israel, with Moses, but God is merciful.

The bronze serpent was a symbol of mercy... a gift... a way out. More than that, it was a way out that taught. In order for someone who was bitten to live, they had to be willing to look square in the face of their trouble. They had to look at that bronze serpent and remember everything about it; about their many rebellions, their many complaints. Looking at that bronze serpent, they had to remember that God sent those serpents as punishment. And when they remember that the serpents were punishment, they will also remember their sin. If they were willing to look at the serpent and be reminded of both their sin and repentance, they would be healed; given a second chance at life.

Now, with all of that as background, let's return to the Gospel of John, where we read *"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."* So, in answer to Nicodemus' question about how to have a second chance at life, Jesus ties this strange snake story from the book of Numbers, with His own saving work; all anyone need do to be born again, was to look and live.

What Jesus was telling Nicodemus was that to enter the Kingdom of God, he and we have to be able to face the crucifixion. We have got to acknowledge our own sinfulness and in faith look to Christ's payment for our sin on the Cross in order to have a second chance to live; in essence to "be born again." This was the same message given to the Israelites in the bronze serpent.

Like those Israelites in the wilderness, for us to be healed, for us to be born from above, we have to be willing to remember both our sin and God's mercy. The image of Jesus hanging on a cross and that bronze snake hanging on a pole are symbols of both: our sin answered by God's mercy.

Israel looked at the bronze snake and remembered what they had done to provoke God, the death that they deserved as a result, and the way God had made for them to live.

The Crucifix does the same for us --not the empty Cross; that is a different symbol. The empty Cross displayed in every Protestant Church symbolizes the resurrection of Jesus and therefore our own hope of resurrection. But the image of the Cross with Jesus dying on it, is the one that John says we must first look at in order to be saved. That's the one which reminds us of our sin; the one which reminds that, as a result of our sin, death came among us. And that is the image which teaches us how to avoid death and to live.

Because Catholic churches prominently display crucifixes, Protestants have historically accused the Catholic tradition of focusing too much on humanity's guilt and sinfulness. But perhaps we Protestants have committed the opposite error in displaying only empty crosses. **No one can come to repentance without acknowledging their own guilt. Only in seeing Christ on the cross, like the bronze serpent on that pole, can we remember that it was our guilt which placed Him there;** it was our own death which should have been our penalty, but God in His love and mercy provided a way out – if we are only willing to look and live. Just as the bronze serpent provided physical healing and life, so the Cross provides us with spiritual healing and eternal life. But in both cases, God demands that we first look at ourselves as the cause of death. Before we can have either healing or life, we must recognize the extent of our sin, the justness of God's punishment, and the wideness of God's mercy. It was all there in the bronze serpent, it is all there in the cross still bearing the body of Christ

If we are willing to look upon this image of the Messiah, who came to die in our place, only then are we ready to hear the next verse, the one so many of us learned as children, "*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life.*" That is what both the serpent and the Cross are ultimately about: life... mercy... forgiveness... love. This is what John went on to emphasize in the very next verse;

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

John 3:17

God could have just let the poisonous snakes have their way and wipe out the Israelites. God could have condemned our world and just let death reign. But that's not what God did. God had Moses put a snake up on a pole, so that those who were willing to admit and remember their sin could find healing; God then willingly went to the

Cross Himself in the person of Christ Jesus, so that those who were willing to accept their own deserved death, might be welcomed into life instead.

Lent is that uncomfortable time of the year when we are urged to remember that our sin has real consequences and that God's forgiveness came at great cost to Himself instead of us. We have no chance of understanding what Easter is all about if we aren't first willing to admit that there are times when we actually do things that are not pleasing to God. We sin.

Therapists will tell you that a person's ability to benefit from therapy and get past their problems often begins with the ability to admit their own part in the problem...to take responsibility for the things they have done which have hurt themselves or others. The person who puts all the blame on others or who expects others to do all the work cannot begin healing.

We have to first look at the snake on the pole... at Jesus on the Cross... and realize that He is up there in part because of what we have done. Then the poison of sin can leave our system. Then our healing can begin. Then we can see the wideness of God's mercy and understand the extraordinary message of the empty tomb. This is the message inherent in the communion table to which we again come today; to remind ourselves of what Christ did for us. As we prepare our hearts for Easter, first lets' spend some time at the Cross.