

Sermon – “Why Have You Brought Us”  
Sunday, March 14, 2021  
Scripture Readings: Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-21  
Trajan McGill  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Springfield, Illinois

Today’s first scripture reading tells an ancient story of the Israelites during their 40-year time as a nomadic people in the wilderness, after their rescue from Egypt, but before they have come to the promised land of Canaan. Here, they have been forced to go around the land of Edom, because the Edomites have turned out with military force and refused to allow the Israelites to pass through, one more of what they are experiencing as an endless series of delays and dissatisfactions in their long wilderness journey. Here these word from the Old Testament book of Numbers, chapter 21, verses 4 through 9.

*<sup>4</sup> From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. <sup>5</sup> The people spoke 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.” <sup>6</sup> Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.”*

*So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.*

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Our second reading is part of a teaching Jesus gives to a Pharisee named Nicodemus, explaining to him some of the concepts of the kingdom of God. Hear the Word of God as recorded in the Gospel According to John, chapter 3, verses 14 through 21.

*<sup>14</sup> “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

*<sup>16</sup> “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

*<sup>17</sup> “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. <sup>18</sup> Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup> And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”*

The scripture today contains some language most of us are probably familiar with. John 3:16 is one of the most well-known passages of all: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”<sup>1</sup> And yet it contains some of the unfamiliar, as well. Good. Music directors under whom I have sung would sometimes take a very familiar piece of music and make us sing it in a different key than usual, to make it fall on our ears and in our voices just differently enough to make us pay attention again to what we are doing with it, and refresh our performance of it. Sometimes seeing where the unfamiliar brushes up against the familiar in scripture can help us see it, too, anew in some way.

Today’s Old Testament scripture certainly ranks among the stories most of us probably find odd and unfamiliar. Even if you’ve read it a hundred times, it likely seems alien. A whole people wandering in the wilderness, filled with frustration and complaining against God—so far that might not be too strange to us, at least metaphorically—but then God lets loose a bunch of serpents, which bite and kill and prompt repentance for the complaining, and which is a bit shocking; and then when the people ask God to take the serpents away, instead God tells Moses to make a statue of one so they can look at it and not die when they get bit.<sup>2</sup>

For many people, the hardest thing is going to be God apparently reacting to the people by sending them poisonous snakes. It isn’t entirely clear what kind of “sending” this is, but it almost certainly seems disturbing to contemporary ears. I suppose it was even more disturbing to those who actually encountered the serpents. I think this might be one of the kind of things I mentioned two weeks ago when I talked about letting certain scriptures be uncomfortable for us, and stay that way, without necessarily having an easy, immediate answer that is both satisfying and faithful to the scripture. I am not going to give an easy answer here.

That is not, however, the only oddity here. Why aren’t the snakes taken away, and instead people are given a miraculous antidote to make use of upon being bitten? Why is that antidote elevating a statue of a serpent on a pole, especially coming from a God who really seems to care a lot about not making graven images and worshipping them? This idea, put a bronze snake on a pole and gaze upon it for healing, seems awfully like idolatry, which is about the biggest sin in the book.<sup>3</sup>

From the perspective of pre-Christian faithfulness, perhaps one way to make sense of this is that people just have a really hard time with an invisible God, and from time to time we need physical reminders that we can see of God’s work in the world. We need to see God’s power and presence accomplished or symbolized somehow in visible, material ways or we start to lose assuredness. Today, in our own practice of faith, we have sacraments, where water, wine, and bread are actual, tangible things that help us see the connection between the parts of reality we can see and the parts that we cannot. These ancient Israelites had pillars of cloud and fire to follow.<sup>4</sup> But there is always this dance, isn’t there, between losing faith because we cannot see, or being able to see and then mistakenly starting to worship the thing we can see instead of the God who lies behind it.

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<sup>1</sup> John 3:16 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

<sup>2</sup> See Numbers 21:4-9.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Exodus 4:20, one of the Ten Commandments, giving a prohibition against making idols or worshipping likenesses of anything in heaven, on earth, or in the water under the earth.

<sup>4</sup> See Exodus 13:17-22 and elsewhere throughout the narrative of the Israelite people in the wilderness after leaving Egypt.

From the perspective of knowing Jesus Christ, there is additional interpretive depth we possess to draw upon, and John's Gospel points us right at it: "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."<sup>5</sup> That, tying this weird and easily avoided story about serpents in the wilderness directly to the salvation of Jesus Christ coming to us "for God so loved the world," is the place where our unfamiliar and familiar rub together and make us think.

There is a kind of literal foreshadowing, for sure: the snake was attached to a wooden pole, and so was Jesus. One provided healing, and so did the other. But I think John is going a little deeper than just making a "don't these things superficially look alike?" kind of connection. Why, when formulating one of the most beautiful and succinct phrasings of the Good News, did John draw upon this old serpent story, of all things?

Consider another parallel between these stories. Think about the part played by the people relative to their own salvation. Moses was not told to give them a tool, some kind of snakebite kit, with which the people could draw the venom out of themselves. Nor was he told to give them an ordeal or a work task, a means of proving themselves and earning their way back into God's good grace to obtain the needed healing. No, they were given something which bestowed healing upon them when they looked upon it.

Christ, too, is an interesting sort of salvation with respect to our own role in the whole thing. We like to puff ourselves up and give ourselves a bigger role, as if we earn our way to heaven, but Jesus, for all his presence as a moral teacher, nevertheless didn't preach any of our own deeds as an earned route to salvation. He preached *himself* as the route to our salvation. Salvation found in him crucified up on that cross, like healing found in seeing a serpent up on that pole, is something received from above, not something we've done for ourselves.

Another oddity here: why God didn't just take away the serpent rather than giving a cure for its bite. I don't know, entirely, but I am reminded of another story, one Jesus told: "Everyone then," Jesus said in Matthew 7, "who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!"<sup>6</sup>

Something I've always found interesting about that story is that the man who builds his house on rock does not get spared any of the rain, floods, or winds. It all smashes up against his house just as much as it does the next man's house. The difference is not, it seems, that the faithful won't have to endure the flood and the wind, but that the foundation of their lives will remain steady and secure to the end.

As for the serpents, well, the serpent is a very old presence among us, isn't it? The first narrative of individual human beings in the entire Bible, the story of Adam and Eve, beginning in Genesis chapter 2, has a serpent coming 'round. Its bite is spiritual, rather than physical, but is

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<sup>5</sup> John 3:14-15 (NRSV).

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 7:24-27 (NRSV).

no less deadly for being so, and all that flows from that tale is still with us today. “You will not die,” the serpent said of the fruit in the garden, “for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”<sup>7</sup>

Well, part of it was true; the eyes of humanity are open, and we do experience not just good but also evil, and know how to commit it ourselves, too, and one of the evils is that we do, in fact, die after all, and that all amounts to quite a fundamental disaster which defines the human condition. I don’t know why God let the serpent into the garden any more than I know why God let all the serpents run loose among the ancient Israelites, or why the world continues to be full of things which bite us and people who have learned themselves to inject venomous things into the world. But we do have a God who acknowledges those things are there and who so loves the world that God’s only Son was lifted up in a dying covenant so that we will not succumb to the serpents but be saved and have life. We have a God about whose absence we wonder when those evils come upon us, like the wind and the rain and the floods, but that is because the foundation, even when rock-solid, isn’t mostly a visible part of a structure.

It is hard when such things aren’t visible, or when we get overly jaded toward the visible things we once recognized as miraculous. “Why have you brought us?” the Israelites ask.<sup>8</sup> But the answer is that the promised land lies ahead, and this place, here, is in between where we’ve come from and where we’re meant to go.<sup>9</sup> God never said this itself was the place we are ultimately meant for, and so maybe we shouldn’t be too surprised we don’t know how to live in it without complaints. We aren’t so different from those Israelites, whether in being truly weary from the long journey or in being sometimes ridiculous in our dramatics—did you notice the part in that Old Testament passage where they said, “There is no food...and we detest this miserable food”?<sup>10</sup> The miraculous manna has apparently tired them,<sup>11</sup> and they can somehow both complain about there being no food and not liking the food in the same sentence. Sometimes we all play the part of the petulant 4-year-old, I suppose.

So let us pray that God may keep us atop that foundation that will see us through, or place us atop it if we have wandered from it. And may God let us indeed see it there under us from time to time, holding us up, and allow us to catch real and enduring glimpses of the solidness and eternity of love and the steadfastness of God. For God so loved the world that the light of life has been given to us, and set up on high for us. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Quote from Genesis 3:4 (*NRSV*). The entire story plays out across Genesis 2:4-3:24.

<sup>8</sup> From Numbers 21:5 (*NRSV*).

<sup>9</sup> The story here is set some time after the Israelite people have escaped slavery in Egypt, but during a 40-year journey through the wilderness before they enter Canaan, the land promised generations earlier to Abraham for his descendants.

<sup>10</sup> From Number 21:5 (*NRSV*).

<sup>11</sup> In the midst of their wilderness journey, at the time of another complaint against God for having brought them into the wilderness to die of hunger, the Israelites were given a substance which appeared on the ground daily, “Manna,” which served as a miraculous food source for 40 years (until reaching Canaan), according to Exodus 16.