

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Ah! This gospel text is so lovely. It contains, I think, the most famous verse of our scripture – John 3:16, “for God so loved the world...” If you never read the rest of the Bible, I think that one verse would be enough.

But... for some reason, even though I must have read this passage a million times throughout my life, I never noticed the reference that Jesus is making here, to the book of Numbers – and I think it’s the first time I ever read those two stories together, back to back, as we have done today. And that Numbers passage, y’all, that was a very strange story. That did not go the way we expect the wilderness stories to go. So... I think we have our work cut out for us today. There is a *lot* to explore and untangle here.

We’ll start, first, with the gospel. The context of this famous, famous passage from John is that a pharisee named Nicodemus came to Jesus by night to ask him questions about God. He said to Jesus, “Rabbi, we know that you have come from God, for no one can do the things you do without being sent by God. But you have said, ‘no one can see the kingdom of heaven without being born from above’ – well, how can anyone be born again after growing old?”

And in response to this question, Jesus says, “No one has ascended into heaven except for the one who descended from heaven, the son of man. And just as Moses lifted the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Jesus is referencing the passage we read today, from the book of Numbers, the fourth book of the Torah. And as a pharisee, Nicodemus would have been familiar with that story. He would have understood the parallel that Jesus was making – Moses lifted up the serpent, which God gave out of grace, for healing, redemption, and salvation; and in the same way the son of man would one day be lifted up – which would be God giving of Godself, out of grace, for healing, redemption, and salvation.

Nicodemus understands, and their conversation continues. He does not have any Numbers-related follow-up questions.

But I – did. And I suspect I’m not alone in that.

Because... at first glance... it seems like God is punishing the people for lamenting. And it seems like God commanded Moses to build an idol... and it kinda seems like that idol was magical? And that is confusing. Right?

And if you heard that passage today and you were just filled with questions, then you are in good company... because this story is really weird. This has tripped up Christian interpreters for centuries. No one

knows how to make heads or tails of this. Which is why I turned to... the rabbis. To prepare for this sermon today, I read a lot of commentaries from Jewish scholars, especially Rabbi Fred Reiner, who serves at Temple Sinai in Washington, D.C.¹ And these rabbis helped me see that there's more to this passage than what we can see at first glance.

Let's go through the story again.

¹Quotes from Rabbi Fred Reiner's comment, "Healing by looking: seraph serpents and theotherapy,"
Reform Judaism, 2006

It says that the Israelites traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom, and they were discouraged.

And the Israelites had a lot of reasons to be discouraged. First of all, two out of their three leaders were dead. From the perspective of this story, Miriam died a few weeks ago, and Aaron died yesterday. And to make matters worse, on this big journey to the promised land, they had a course set – and it went right through the land of Edom. And they had actually just tried to go through Edom – and the Edomites said no. And they said they'd kill anyone who tried.

So... the Israelites turned around. They started walking backwards. That's where our story begins. With the Israelites walking towards Egypt, towards the red sea, away from the promised land.

These people – the people who turned around – this is no longer the same group of people who left Egypt. I mean that literally, but also metaphorically. This is a new generation, with new spiritual problems. They are restless... but the thing is, they know the script. They've heard the stories about God's wilderness people, because those were their parents. They know what's supposed to happen. When they cry out, God is supposed to fix it.

After all, when the waters of Marah were too bitter, the people cried out. Then God showed Moses how to sweeten it, and it was good.²

When there wasn't enough food to go around, the people cried out. Then God sent manna from heaven, and it was good.

²Bitter water, Exodus 15:22-25; manna from heaven, Exodus 16:2-3; water from the rock, Exodus 17:3; quails to eat, Numbers 11:4-6

When they were all out of water and they were thirsty, the people cried out. Then God showed Moses how to get water from the rock, and it was good.

And now – well, there isn't enough food, there isn't water, and we're sick and tired of manna, and by the way this desert is filled with venomous snakes, vipers and adders and cobras, snakes that God made... that when they bite you, the bite burns like crazy.

Now, in this text, it says that God sent the snakes – but, as it says in Deuteronomy, the snakes have been there all along, because that's where they live. This is their habitat. But at this moment in their journey – at this moment of pain and sorrow and frustration and restlessness – yeah, everything sucks. The food, the water, the snakes! This wilderness is a never ending spiral of despair!

The people of God were losing faith.

And when I say faith – when you see the word faith in the Bible, especially in the Hebrew Bible – it doesn't mean *belief*. It means trust. Moses, as their faith leader, “did not challenge the people to *believe* some [theological] doctrine about God.”³ He challenged them to *trust* God, to trust that their lives and the future of their people was in God's hands.

But the people did not trust God. They didn't even ask God if God would lead them through Edom, or if there was any *other* way, any brave or curious new path – they just turned around. Here they are, having

followed God's voice into the desert, but they lost hope, and they lost faith.

³See W. Eugene March, *Feasting on the Word for Lent 4B*, Theological Perspective.

And this new generation – oh, they are different. Their parents blamed Miriam and Aaron and Moses, but they blame God. God, God of the universe, God of wonders, why did you do this? Why have you left us here to die?

And when they see the snakes – when their people begin to die from bites that burn like fire – they think that it must be God punishing them for crying out.

It doesn't actually say that anywhere. But they think it, this new generation makes that logical leap for themselves. And so they ask Moses to talk to God for them – tell God we're sorry, and please take the snakes away, the same way that you gave our parents manna and water?

But that's not what happens.

The snakes are not wiped out. Something else happens instead – something much more wonderful. The God of grace gives healing. God does not remove the hardship, God offers a way through it.

God tells Moses to make a serpent out of bronze and put it on a pole. Anyone who looks at it will live.

And though, at first glance, it seems like the bronze serpent is a magical talisman or some kind of dousing rod for holy energy, Rabbi Reiner wrote that this bronze serpent was neither an idol, nor “a prop for magic.”

Of *course*, this statue made by human hands had no holy power. Who is it who does the healing? Who brings the water? Who made all the water in the first place?

God.

So this bronze serpent that God told Moses to make – this was a devotional tool for the people, a device that would “lead the people to direct their attention to God.” It was a serpent to remind them of the danger in the world. And it was elevated on a pole so the people would “look upward toward God and away from the danger at their feet.” So that they would trust in God again – so that they would know that being people of God does not mean living in a world where there are no snakes, where there is no danger... it means knowing who the healer is, and where abundant life comes from.

The Israelites came to know healing by this symbol, a serpent, lifted high on a pole. And they honored this symbol – they carried it with them inside the ark of the covenant, alongside the stone tablets of the law, so they would always remember. And when they finally got to the promised land, and they built a temple in Jerusalem, they kept the bronze serpent there, in God’s house.

But... over the course of history... something happened. At some point, for the people of God, that bronze serpent – it wasn’t just a symbol of healing. It wasn’t just a tool for devotion. It became something else.

Over hundreds of years... our ancestors began to **raise** offerings before the bronze serpent. They began to burn incense and **wave** the smoke towards it. They began to **bow** their heads before it.

Once it was a tool for devotion to God – but it became something else.

It says in 2 Kings that when King Hezekiah came to power over the kingdom of Israel, the very first thing he did was enter the Temple in Jerusalem, overturn the altars, and destroy the bronze serpent, because people were honoring that image in place of honoring God.

And you know, a story like this, it really makes you wonder about the symbols we hold close. In John, when it says that just like Moses lifted up the serpent on a pole, so the son of man will be lifted up – and knowing that the people of Israel loved the bronze serpent, their symbol of God – it makes me think of *this*. This cross.

And not just this cross, specifically, in this place. But every cross. Why is this here?

Almost everywhere you go on earth we Christians hang this image in our sanctuaries. We bow down before it. We cover it in incense. We focus on this cross in prayer, and devotion. We buy crosses for our homes, we wear them around our necks, we hang them in hospital rooms and nurseries, we get them tattooed.

Why do we do it? Is this cross just our logo, a visual signifier that we are

Christians? Or is it communicating something, something important? Is it here in case we forget our past? Or lose track of our future?

Does it remind us that Jesus died and rose again? Does it remind us that the wilderness is a dangerous place but God is here to guide us through? Does it remind us who we are, or who God is?

There are a million right answers to this question... but you're the only one who can answer it for yourself.

In this next few moments of meditation, I challenge you to ask yourself: why is this cross here? What is its meaning, for you?