

Numbers 21:4-9 (ESV)

The Bronze Serpent

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵And 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 loathe this worthless food.” ⁶Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” ⁹So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

John 3:14-15 (ESV)

¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Everyone Who Sees It Shall Live

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Texts: *Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21*

Every once in awhile there come passages in the Bible that in a few verses capture the great sweep and meaning of our faith. The sermon on the mount is one, with its ironic ideas of who will end up on top and its unabashed ethical mandates, including the Golden Rule. Another is the answer Jesus gives when asked to summarize the law and the prophets, “The most important is, he says, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.’³⁰ And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’³¹ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Such passages are memorable; their familiarity warms our hearts; we hear them and instinctively know that we have moved close to the hearth-fire of our tradition.

This morning’s passages from Numbers and John do not immediately seem candidates for so lofty a station. In the desert the Israelites are bitten by snakes. Moses pleads to God. And finally God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole, so that whoever is bitten may look upon it and be cured. Very strange. And then in John, Jesus lifted up on the cross is compared to the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up. Stranger still.

This morning I want to invite you into a version of the Biblical story, less familiar but perhaps as close to the flames of truth than our memorized narratives. We find this version of the story the whole way through the scriptures, and indeed, today the story will carry us from creation to resurrection.

It all begins with a snake, or as the Bible translators prefer, a serpent. Adam and Eve are as happy as clams in the Garden of Eden. But then the serpent comes along, the crafty serpent. The serpent sows the seeds of grasping desire. The serpent tempts Adam and Eve to grasp after what they do not have. The serpent is a sneaky interlocutor. He takes an indirect route. He engages Eve with a question, and from there leads her down the path to ruin.

The serpent said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’”² And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden,³ but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’”⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die.⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Here in the third chapter of Genesis we have the very first act of human coveting. Here at the hands of the serpent that human proclivity to desire what we don't have and what we hadn't thought we needed was set in motion, and throughout Biblical history and human history that desire has been a plague upon our house. In the very next chapter it leads to the first murder. Cain kills Abel, because Cain covets the praise that God has heaped upon his brother.

Now, how does this coveting actually get us in such trouble? O, this is ingenious, for the serpent, as I said, is a sneaky thing. The serpent tempts Adam and Eve. The serpent says they can know good and evil, like God does. The serpent says it will make you wise. By the end of the story, the only thing Adam and Eve seem to have learned is that they are stark naked. That hardly qualifies as god-like wisdom. While many commentators have tried to figure out what were the fruits of the fruit that Adam and Eve ate, my guess is that a more fruitful approach is to look at the mechanism the serpent created. The serpent convinced Adam and Eve that they would be much better off if they only had this thing they didn't have, the fruit on the tree in the middle of the garden. It really doesn't matter what the fruit is or what the fruit gives them. What matters is that the serpent got them believing they just had to have it, they just couldn't live without it. Wait a minute. It's more than that. Adam and Eve have been convinced that this thing they covet, for which they have such desire that they cannot live without it, is, well, desirable. Without putting too fine a point on it, they have been convinced that what they desire is good, that it would be a good thing to have, and that therefore the means to obtain are acceptable if not completely good. And so, the trap has been sprung.

The result, the result we see repeated day after day over the aeons and through the ages is the lengths to which we human beings will go to get these things we covet, which we believe we must have and which we believe are good. From wars to family feuds, most of the wreckage of humanity may be due to our coveting, and to our ascribing goodness to our grasping. The serpent has got us believing that the thing we don't have we need, that it's good, and that therefore our going after it is good, too. My God, we even call upon God to help us get what we want. "God bless America." It makes me shiver to ask, to whom do we owe that line, God or the serpent?

Throughout Biblical history God keeps trying to turn the people around. In the passage from the book of Numbers, God has freed the people from the Egyptians. They are now in the desert, in that famous forty years of wandering. The people have become impatient. Supplies are low. Morale is lower. They want better. They covet and covet some more. They even covet being back in Egypt. Every time I read this passage I get a laugh out of it. The people complain bitterly. The people say there is no food; there is no water. Then they say, "And we loathe this lousy food." Well, they had some food, but they coveted better.

The way the story reads is that, impatient with the people's antics, God sends fiery serpents that bite people, and many of them die. The people confess their disobedience and ask Moses to pray for the serpents to go away. Moses prays to God for relief. God responds. But God doesn't take the serpents away. God tells Moses to create a bronze serpent and put it on a pole, so that when the people look upon it, they will live. As we said at the beginning of the sermon, strange.

In the Bible, written as it was by humans trying to understand their God, I think we often

get some evidence of human confusion in the transcription. Very often, we read the stories of God, angry and vengeful at what the people have done. The plot works itself out in a simple pattern. The people misbehave, God gets angry and punishes them. The people confess and repent of their sins. God gets over his rage and removes the punishment from the people. My guess is that our writers are working out of their own idiom, in which they expect an angry God, at least in part because people themselves get angry when they are affronted. Like father, like children. But if that were the truth about God, if that was the real plot-line of this story, God would have been furious and then gotten over being angry and taken the serpents away, job done. But that's not what happened. God didn't remove the serpents. God instructed Moses to raise a bronze serpent on a pole. This idea of an angry, punishing God probably says a lot more about us than about God.

So, let's tell the story in just slightly different way. God delivered the people Israel from bondage in Egypt. But the time of bondage had had its advantages. The meals and water were regular. There were places to sleep. And the people knew what to expect each day. Now, suddenly under the stars of the desert, the food and water were unpredictable. Where they would end up and when was anybody's guess. The people became agitated. The venom of the old serpent in Eden flowed within the people. They coveted what they left. They coveted anything that anyone else had. They were angry at God and Moses, and they felt they had a right to be angry. As the coveting and unrest grew, struggle broke out in the camps. Because the people felt justified in their anger at God and at Moses and at their situation and at their neighbors who had things they wanted, the people not only turned on one another with violence, but they felt the violence was good and right.

But soon the turmoil spun out of control, and the people begged for it to stop. They begged Moses to beg God to do something. And what did God do? God told Moses to craft a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. And when the people felt the urge for covetous violence, they were to look upon the serpent on the pole and live. That is they were to look upon the serpent on the pole and remind themselves that their self-destructive urges were sown by the wiles of the serpent. They would remind themselves that those urges were not good or useful, and they would come to their senses. The ending of the passage sums it up concisely, "And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live."

So now, from the beginning chapters and books of the Bible, we are cast all the way to the Gospel of John. There we find an allusion to Moses and the bronze serpent. Indeed, raising up the serpent on the pole is compared to raising up Jesus on the rude timber of the cross. At first glance the verses seem to make little sense. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Is Jesus comparable to the serpent? That certainly doesn't sound right. But look what happens, look what happens when we garner the insights from the earlier stories. The serpent on the pole may have worked for a bit in the wilderness. But we know that the cure wasn't permanent. God continued to struggle with a stiff-necked people throughout Biblical history. Indeed, Jesus, the Son of God, struggled with the stiff-necked people in his ministry. The venom of coveting and believing that the things we covet are good and will makes us whole continued unabated. Jesus' own disciples all too often reveal that they, too, were in it for what he could

deliver to them – good seats in heaven, a place of good standing on earth, political success. In the end everyone from the highest authorities in the Roman occupation, to the religious authorities in Jerusalem, to his own disciples played their part in bringing him to the cross. The venom that infected humankind from the time of the Garden of Eden was at work still in all of them, and dare we say in all of us.

The image of Jesus lifted up on a pole, the cross. Brilliantly its fact and its effect is compared to the bronze serpent raised in the ancient desert. “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

The Gospel of John, more than any of the other Gospels, or other New Testament books, for that matter, insists in believing in Jesus. That’s probably why John is a favorite of those Christians who emphasize taking Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior as the way to eternal life. But what, exactly, does it mean to believe in Christ, especially in this case, to believe in Christ lifted upon a pole crucified? Surely the Gospel isn’t simply saying that we believe Jesus existed, or even that we believe that he was the Son of God, something like we might believe the weather report for tomorrow. To be honest, I think God has bigger fish to fry than to worry whether we believe in that sense. The kind of belief demanded here is one of full credibility and confidence. So, “the son of man must be lifted up, that whoever places full confidence and credibility in him will have eternal life.” Now we’re getting somewhere.

We are to put full confidence and credibility in the Christ, in Christ crucified and lifted up before us, before our eyes. We are to look upon Christ lifted up on a pole and find credible meaning in it. How astonishing this is! The real belief is to come on Good Friday? Can this be? Well, look at the Easter story in John, and the other Gospels for that matter, there’s hardly an admonition to believe in any of them. John wants us to believe in something on Golgotha, long before the trumpets of Easter.

In the end, it’s marvelously simple. The Israelites in the desert looked upon the raised serpent and saw the cause of their plight. We are to look upon Christ lifted up on the cross and see the effect. We are simply to believe, to comprehend that we did it, or the seed that serpent sowed in us has led us to do it. We are to look on the crucified Christ and see the result of what the serpent has sown in us. We are to see that we murder the Son of God in God’s name, that we harm the innocent in our covetous frenzy, that we turn the world upside down and crave those things that will not fulfill us, and that we destroy the very things that will. We are to look on Christ raised up on a pole before our weary eyes and see what we have done, and what we do day by day. And we are to shift our confidence from those things that drag us down to the reality of what he is telling us. In short, we are to be brought to our senses.

If you were following the scripture readings in your Bibles this morning, you no doubt noticed that I read only the first few of the verses I said I was going to read from John. I wanted to bring us to this place where we have come, where we might hear them in a different key.

John 3:16-21 (ESV)

For God So Loved the World

¹⁶“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should

not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God.”

In a love of unimaginable reach, God puts before us the light to expose our deeds. Exposed, understood, allowing ourselves to give what we see confidence and credibility will change our deeds from darkness to light, and we will not perish but have eternal life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.