

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-21

My father grew up on a farm, worked with his hands. He has hunted and fished his whole life, always harvests his catch. Lives on venison and walleye, has tractors and guns. He is a bit of man's man, unless..., you see him around a snake. We took the kids to the zoo once in Philadelphia with my parents. Dad wouldn't even go into the snake house. They creep him out. I remember him stepping over a trench once and looking down in the process to see a big black snake right below him; he jumped and squealed. He still lives in western NY, where I grew up, and where there are snakes everywhere in the summer. It often felt like you couldn't pick up a piece of firewood or go walking in the woods without being startled by a garter snake. And we used to get these big black snakes too, which were good because they ate rodents and garter snakes, but they were about 6 feet long and could seriously give you a heart attack. It was rare to find a poisonous snake out east. Being startled to death was about the only risk. And while I can go into the snake house at the zoo, snakes do still creep me out and I enjoy living in the west where you don't see that many snakes.

Our Old Testament reading features a prevalence of snakes, like hot summer in upstate NY. Only the Israelites encounter a prevalence of poisonous snakes. We are told a good number of people are being bitten and are dying. And this phenomenon of being bitten by these snakes is understood or construed to be a punishment for their grumbling and lack of trust during this wilderness trek. As a student of the Old Testament, there is nothing like a good weird Old Testament story. You gotta love it! Not only do they encounter poisonous snakes, but they see this as punishment. And what is more, their way of allaying or avoiding this punishment, and being healed of their deadly snake bites is to look upon a lifted-up image of a snake. The image in our bulletin today is of a sculpture that was erected in Jordan remembering this story.

In our recent study on Totems, Monuments, and Memorials, we talked about idols, images, and representations of God in the bible. In the Ancient Near east, images had an important representational power, and at times, a certain magical power. We also talked about how images are contested sometimes. For example, when the Israelites fashion the golden calf as an image or likeness for God while they are in the wilderness, that is seen as a serious no-no. But here they are instructed to fashion an image of a snake; an image of a serpent with the power of healing.

Now this all sounds weird, but even weirder is the fact that the symbol of the serpent is still a healing symbol today, found on ambulances and paramedic badges. [Show images on screen]. In these symbols, the rod with the snake around it comes from the cult of Asclepius, a Greco-Roman god of medicine. The symbol of the snake, therefore, is still a symbol of healing even today. There seems to be a number of pontifications for why, shedding of the skin that indicated longevity and immortality. The snake's ability to change from a lethargic stage to one of rapid activity. The most likely reason, it seems, is that the poisonous snake possesses both venom and anti-venom, both the curse and the cure.

Certainly, in our story from Numbers 21 the snake is both the curse and the symbol of cure. Like a vaccine that builds up immunity to a small dose of the virus or germ, like a therapist's invitation to look at and work with the pain or trauma rather than run from it, sometimes curse and cure are closely related. The Israelites looked upon the image lifted up, and that by looking upon the image, there is a certain magical quality to the serpent image. That by "looking upon" the image, they are cured. Looking upon carrying the sense of placing trust, of placing your need, of looking to for help that you can't achieve any other way. And so, as the text reads, "whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live."

Now I may not be so bold to indulge this strange story if it wasn't for the fact that Jesus draws upon this story and its imagery to convey something about his own journey. He is speaking to Nicodemus, one entrenched in the law, one credentialled in teaching, one who is looked up to for authority and truth. But true healing, Jesus suggests, cannot be found in such things. True redemption, he will tell Nicodemus comes from being reborn in the Spirit. And true healing will come not from looking up to teachers, but looking upon the Christ lifted up.

Yes, Jesus is forecasting his death on the cross, which for many will be understood as defeat, as weakness, as a curse. But Jesus is likening his being lifted up on the cross to Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. That just as the serpent was a symbol of both curse and cure, Jesus will become the curse; he will take on the curse of sin. We hear similar language in Galatians: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written," referencing Deuteronomy, "'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.'"

And so, as John 3 reads, "And just 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. 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."

Many theologians have pontificated on how it is that Jesus achieves forgiveness and healing for us through the cross. It is our western tendency to want to explain and understand the mechanics of such things. And so, we delve into theories on the atonement, explanations for why Jesus had to die and how that imputes to his followers grace and forgiveness. And while there are various theories, it is the theory of substitutionary atonement that has dominated our understandings. That being that sin required a punishment, a sacrifice to atone for the infraction of sin. And if God didn't want to punish humanity forever and eternally, then another more perfect sacrifice would have to be offered to satisfy the consequences for sin. Jesus becomes that sacrifice. But as any rational explanation of spiritual realities goes, a theory or anecdote can only give a partial explanation, introducing its own problems even as it seeks to explain, such as conveying God as so bloodthirsty or bent on his own principles, that someone must die. Our understandings have a tendency to break down.

But resorting to the story of the serpents in the wilderness, as Jesus does, offers another image, another way of looking at Jesus' death on a cross. It is that Jesus takes on the curse, Jesus becomes the curse, the effects of sin and rebellion and brokenness, taken upon himself. And Jesus, like the serpent that is both curse and cure, is lifted for all to look upon.

Belief is the word Jesus uses. To believe in him, like the Israelites looking upon the lifted-up serpent for healing. We look upon Jesus, believe in Jesus as the cure to the effects of sin, to the poison that has affected every aspect of our human lives. The curse/cure lifted up on a pole for all to look upon who wish for healing, forgiveness, grace, and redemption.

We wouldn't call it magical, like the looking upon the serpent image to cure one of an actual snake-bite, but there is some kind of spiritual transfer that happens that does not compute in our rational, western, scientific minds. Belief. Trust. Reliance. "everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." In this belief, in this looking upon, there is a recognition that we lack the resources to heal ourselves of this condition, and must rely upon and look upon one who might heal us.

It forces us past our physical, moral, or volitional capacities into the realm of grace, surrender, and accepting of forgiveness. To move towards our curse as the source of our healing. To confess our curse, our shortcomings, and to confess our need for the cure, for the one who offers love and grace and wholeness, if we are humble enough to look upon the cross.

“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. ¹⁸ 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.” This sounds like a voice of judgment on those who do not believe. But it is based on the fact that unless one faces their curse and is willing to look up the cure, they are bound in the same cycle, feeling the effects of the curse but unwilling to come to the end of themselves, so that they might humbly learn of grace and healing.

Whatever our model or way of understanding atonement, of understanding what it is Christ accomplishes on the cross, there is a sense that Christ becomes both curse and cure. And that by pressing close to the cross, by looking upon the son of man lifted up, by believing in him, we press closer to our vulnerability, our own sinful curse, and also to our own healing and cure, the remedy to our pain, to our limitations, and an opening to the wonders of grace – unmerited grace offered to those who have learned the humility to ask, the humility to look upon the one lifted up for healing and help.

I love a good weird Old Testament story, partly because it reminds us that life is weirder than we sometimes acknowledge, that spiritual life and our reliance on God, on something greater than ourselves is wonderfully weird. And how appropriate, of all the images that Moses might lift up, is that of a serpent, that weird animal that creeps up silently, that startles, that has a poison that threatens, that has a power to make the manliest of us squirm and squeal, pushing us past those notions of self-determination, of self-protection. To be a little undone, a break in our defenses. Because there must be some sense of coming to the end of ourselves, of our strength, of our reason; there must be some willingness to embrace the spiritual, the weird, the mysteries of grace, if we are able to move to Good Friday and truly look upon the cross.

And all God’s people said... Amen.

Numbers 21:4-9

⁴ 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. ⁵ 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.” ⁶ Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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.” ⁹ 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.

John 3

¹⁴ And just 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.

¹⁶ “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.

¹⁷ “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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ 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.”



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