

Lent IV

Numbers 21.4-9
John 3.14-21

On this fourth week of Lent, we are given a pairing of stories – one from the Old Testament Book of Numbers, and one from the New Testament Gospel of John.

In the Old Testament story, the Israelites, having lost patience yet again with the hardships of life in the desert, speak out against God and Moses. Their complaint is the final one in a long line of murmurs – murmurs that until this point God has answered with compassionate care.

When the Israelites complain that their drinking water is bitter, God instructs Moses to sweeten it.

When they grumble about their hunger, God provides them with manna. When they cry out in thirst, God instructs Moses to strike a rock and produce abundant water.

When they despair for lack of meat, God causes flocks of quail to fly into their camp.

This time, though, God's response to their complaining is not as gracious. God answers their 'we-want-to-go-back-to-slavery' cry by sending poisonous serpents into their midst. The serpents bite them, and several of them die. This raises thorny questions about sin and judgment, however I want to focus on what happens next.

The people repent of their sin, and beg Moses to pray on their behalf.

When Moses does so, God says,

Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.

As instructed, Moses makes a serpent of bronze, and sets it high on a pole. When the people who've been bitten look up at the serpent, their snakebites are healed, and they live.

Let's now turn our focus to the conversation of the Gospel we heard this morning between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus.

When Nicodemus approaches Jesus under cover of night to inquire about God, they enter into a long and bewildering dialogue about birth, light, Spirit, and belief. At one point in the conversation Jesus refers back to the ancient story from Numbers which Nicodemus must know inside out, and Jesus states

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.

An odd comparison, the loving, saving Messiah to the bronze replica of a poisonous snake. I wonder if it means something about perspective. About seeing. About casting our eyes in a new and less comfortable direction.

In the Old Testament story, God requires the Israelites to look up. To gaze without flinching at the monstrous thing their sin has created. The Israelites have to see in the serpent the result of their own failure to trust God. They have to understand that their ongoing failure to trust in God has consequences. What they need is full-bodied, heart-and-soul confidence in God's goodness, presence, provision, and love.

Hence the bronze snake, which forces them to stare the poison down until they see in it the grief, the anger, the judgment, and the unending mercy of a God whose love is vast but tough, deep but demanding. It's a love that will heal but also expose truth - truth that hurts. It's a love that will deliver but at the same time invite a change in perspective, a shift in apprehension, a bitter yet ultimately salvific looking up.

What might this story of a serpent on a pole illuminate about the cross of Jesus?

For those of us who struggle to reconcile the role of God's will in the death of God's Son, perhaps this story offers a way in. It was the will of God that Jesus declares and embodies the coming of God's kingdom. A divine kingdom of peace, of restorative justice, of radical and universal love, grace, freedom, and hope. A kingdom dramatically unlike the all-too-broken, all-too-human one Jesus was born into.

So why did Jesus die?

He died because he unflinchingly fulfilled the will of God. He died because he exposed the ungracious sham at the heart of all human kingdoms, holding up a mirror that shocked his contemporaries and still shocks us at the deepest levels of our imaginations. He unveiled the poison, he showed us the snake, he revealed what our human kingdoms, left to themselves, will always become unless God in God's mercy delivers us.

In the cross, we are forced to see what our refusal to love, our indifference to suffering, our craving for violence, our resistance to change, our hatred of difference, our addiction to judgment, and our fear of the Other must wreak.

The bronze snake of Moses's day was not magical. It was not meant to be idolised.

Neither is the cross we contemplate during this Lenten season.

As the cross invites us to look up, to reorient ourselves, and to depend wholly on God to bring life out of death, light out of shadow, and healing out of pain, then the cross functions as a sacrament. A means of grace. A path to the divine.

The cross of Christ is a great mystery. Among many other things, it is a stunning paradox of sorrow and hope, judgment and mercy, despair and healing, brokenness and wholeness. Holiness.

The gift God gives us at Calvary is the gift of contemplation, not the gift of perfect comprehension.

Wendy