

Numbers 21: 4-9 and John 3: 14-21 “Bending Over Backward”

Numbers: 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. 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.’ Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 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. 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.’ 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.

What we’ve just heard is a snippet from the later days in the Israelites’ 40-year journey through the wilderness. This scene is culmination of a “relationship pattern” that has developed between God and the people, and the pattern goes like this: God saves the people and set them on a journey towards freedom; the people complain; God provides what they asked; the people complain... Rescued by God from the slavery in Egypt, Israelites complain about the life in the wilderness along the way.

First, they didn’t like the bitter water, so God showed Moses how to sweeten it. Then they complained about not having food, so God sent down manna from heaven. Then they complained that they were thirsty, and God told Moses how to access gushing water by striking the rock. Then, they whined that they missed eating meat, and complained to Moses, saying “‘If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.’”

Yeah, I’m not even paraphrasing; they are their words right out of the Bible.” God provided them food and water, faithfully, every time they cried for it. Listening to them whine, their gross ingratitude almost makes you blush, doesn’t it?

So, Moses said to God “how am I supposed to lead this whining bunch? God told Moses to tell them, and I quote “...the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall eat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you—*because you have rejected the Lord who is among you*, and have wailed before the Lord, saying, “Why did we ever leave Egypt?”

See, it is not their ingratitude *per se* that God is upset about; rather, it is that they don’t trust God as the one to lead them to freedom and life, remaining with them along the hard

journey through the wilderness. This rejection of God, this lack of trust or faith in God, is a real problem, because, if you remember the Covenant God had made with Noah, and with Abraham, God is doing all the promising and all the upholding, and all that is asked of the people is to trust God's promise and remain in this covenantal relationship. That's the only way this can work.

So, you see this going back and forth between Israelites who complain and God who rescued them from the Egypt where they lived and died as no people in order that they can live as God's people in the Promised Land, with God bending over backwards to get them to trust God, that God is the God of Life for them, and that God has their best interest in mind.

All 4 times they complained against Moses. Now, in today's passage, the Israelites complain once again, saying, "there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food," and this time against Moses AND their God. And God responds by sending poisonous serpents among the people and the serpents bit them and many died. When this happened, the people were quick to repent and asked God to "take away the serpents" from them. Naturally, they don't want to die; they want to live. Although they wanted to go back to Egypt, rather than to follow the Lord of Life. When they see death in the form of poisonous serpents, though, they repent and turn to God to save them by removing the serpents.

Then, God does this curious thing. If God just wanted to bend over backward one more time to win their fickle hearts, the simplest thing would be to just get rid of the serpents as they asked. But God doesn't; the serpents remain, and people continue to get bitten by them. Instead of simply removing the serpents, God told Moses to make a poisonous serpent and lift it up on a pole, so anyone bitten by a serpent could turn to look at it and live.

What's curious about it? Firstly, it may seem strange that a graven image of a snake should have healing power. After all, weren't they just told in the Ten Commandment not to make a graven image of anything to worship it? But this is no graven image made by human will for the purpose of worship. It is God who made it, through Moses, for the life-saving purpose. The power to heal is not in the bronze object itself but in the One behind its making and its being lifted up, and that's God. To look at the serpent and live is to trust in the Power of God to save.

Secondly, and importantly, God had this bronze serpent made to save anyone who *had already been bitten*; in other words, the serpent is lifted up on the pole in order that those *who are already destined to die* might live. And, if those who were bitten and dying turned and

looked at the serpent in order to live, it is because they believe in that power of God to save, which is to say, they trust God.

Lastly, the part of the story where God sends poisonous serpents to kill people brought me to an uncomfortable pause. God intentionally causing people to die? And why the serpent? Remember that images are very fluidly used in biblical traditions. Where else have we encountered serpents in the Bible? There is that serpent in the Garden of Eden, tempting the first humans to question, that is, to distrust God's words and in so doing disobey their Creator God.

What if the poisonous serpents in this story are the voices within us humans that tempt to question, distrust and disobey God? What if the serpent is the voice we hear, and worse yet follow, that tempts us away from the God of our life to the pathway back to the death of slavery.

Then, God did not so much "send" those serpents as "unleashed" what was already inhabiting in the hearts of the Israelites, and ours, exposing, or bringing to light, what was potentially deadly, hidden within their hearts in order to save us. When they looked at the serpent on the pole, they saw their own disobedience, their sins against God and at the same time trusted in the power and the will of the selfsame God to save them. There again, God bending over backward to bring life out of death for God's people.

It is with this image of the serpent lifted up on the pole that Jesus talks about his own role in God's salvation story.

Today's Gospel reading follows Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus about how one enters the kingdom of heaven. Hear now, the Gospel according to John 3: 14-21

And 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. '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. '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. 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. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 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.'

Moses lifted up the serpent so those who were bitten and dying could live. So also, God lifted Jesus up on the cross so those who were condemned could turn and believe in him and live.

After all, isn't that the meaning of the world "save."? People already "saved" don't need more saving, just as Jesus said, the healthy doesn't need a physician; it is the sick who does.

God bends over backwards once again and sends God's only son, to save those who are headed for certain death because they had rejected God. The Gospel of John begins "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." God so loved such world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Jesus on the cross exposes the sins of the world and brings to light those who are in darkness. Apostle Paul reminds us: God proves God's love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. We look upon Jesus "lifted up" on the cross and know what the power of the sinful world did to the One whom God gave to us in Love.

But God's action of "lifting up" did not stop at the cross. With Jesus, God's "lifting up" continued on to God's raising Jesus from the grave on that first resurrection morning, and higher still to Christ's return to God in his ascension to the kingdom of heaven, to his and our Eternal Home. So, anyone who believes, or trust, in this crucified and risen Christ, share in this Eternal Life. "Eternal" not just endless, but is a way of describing life as lived in the unending presence of God, as a child of God, beginning now. Eternal life begins in the believer's present. If you trust in this power and the will of God for us, your Eternal Life is already here

Look at him lifted up and know how noble a human life can be, and keep looking at him and be empowered to rise up into a newness of life, live in his way, which is to live in Eternal Life. And we begin with doing God's will.

My seminary professor Dr. Christopher Morse used to say to us "God saved the world through Christ once for all, but not all once." God is still at work, drawing the whiners and grumblers of our world to look to the cross, to see the power of their own disobedience and be led to repentance and to Life Eternal. Like the Israelites, we are prone to lose hope and lose trust when our journey gets tough. But God has made us Christ's church, the presence of the crucified and risen Christ in the world as it is. Let us carry on proclaiming this amazing love of God to the world, bending over backwards if we must. Amen.