

Journey of the Cross: Sign of the Serpent

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Texts: Numbers 21:4-9

John 3: 14-21

As a child, I found myself one day looking curiously at the silver oval my mother wore on a bracelet on her wrist. On each side was a little red serpent, wound around a pole-- a symbol for things medical. Between the snakes, there was printed her medical condition: Diabetes Mellitus type I. These were signs of her illness, yet named information which might be the only available clue to keep her alive. The little snakes in metal were a tiny symbol of both death and life.

There is a strange story: the children of Israel wandering in the wilderness found healing from snakebite, by looking up at a bronze snake on a pole!

This is the story: The Israelites, having fled from Egypt, had been sojourning a long time in the desert. Moses had been forced to lead the people the long way around, back by the Red Sea! They became bitter, and grumbled against Moses, even against God. In the midst of the backbiting, when it seemed to them like things couldn't get any worse, they were rewarded with snakes, snakes which bit, fiery bites. And many died...

Simple people, who knew the bitterness of their own hearts, they assumed they were being punished for the grumbling. In a panic, they came to Moses and pleaded with him for help, saying, "We have sinned by speaking against God and against you..."

In the story God said, "Make a fiery snake, and set it on a pole, and every one who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses fashioned a metal snake, and set it on a pole. Whomever was bitten could look on the bronze serpent-- and live.

This is not an easy story to cope with, religiously or personally! That's why I shared Lynn's wonderful introduction to the reading [*see below]. We are not the first to struggle. Years after Moses, ancient King Hezekiah had the bronze snake removed from the temple in Jerusalem... people continued to burn incense to it (2 Kings 18:4). And then there's this: How could a loving God send deadly snakes? Was that really just people projecting their own sense of guilt onto God? The same contradiction confronts us when we hear Christian preachers suggesting that God is punishing a nation when there is a natural disaster: Wrong! And just what is it about looking at a bronze snake, for healing, anyway? Strange medicine.

All good questions. We need to read stories like this carefully, with an open mind, and not too literally! But what *can* we get out of it?

It's interesting, isn't it, that God had the people look at an image which openly named the source of their pain. Isn't the message: "Lift out of the shadows the thing which is biting you, and look at it in the light; confront the source of the venom. Don't run in fear, but face it with courage, trust in something better. Face the burning fear that is killing you; trust in my healing

power. Focus on the thing that has wounded, is burning in your veins. Face your fear; look beyond it, turn toward Me."

Authentic healing—not to be confused with just any physical cure—isn't possible, unless we face the things that hide in the shadows. Healing is possible, only if we name the source of the poison which burns. Healing is possible, but we must we look at the suffering. Healing is possible, if we focus on the source, and yet look through it and beyond it, to the God who is our hope and our deliverance.

In our time, there are many things we would rather not look at. They are not hard to find. But let's be confessional here, we often prefer not to look too hard. Let them lie! Maybe they will go away? But poison burns in each of us and in our collective body as a city, as nation, as a world. It has to be faced, openly and with courage. It has to be named, and confronted, trusting in a Love more powerful than fear.

The Gospel of John talks about how Christ was lifted up—on the cross, hoisted like a serpent on a pole. Strange disturbing image. Yet when we do dare look at Christ crucified, we see the reflected image of all the crucifying done in our time and throughout time, we see the venom, which courses through human hearts and minds.

What was the human poison, which caused Jesus to be crucified? If we are to look up at the cross and be healed we must really look at what is crucifying humanity. What is at the heart of human hatred and suffering? There are so many sources in our world, including racism and bigotry, fear of gay people, hatred of women, even self-hatred. And there's greed. And then there is sheer violence—sheer unexplained *human* snakebite.

Be silent with me and look upon this simple wooden cross before us today: How and where is Christ being crucified today? [One moment silence]

Now for a moment I would like to ask you to talk to your neighbor—pair off in groups of two or three, and share with one another. How is Christ crucified today? [Pause for conversation]

Now I want to ask you to be brave—call out, in a word or two, one thing you discussed—if you feel it is worth sharing—what continues to crucify humankind today? [Repeat back what people say].

If our children or our friends were to ask us "Why is there suffering in the world?" none of us could claim to come up with the single answer. Why did the people of Israel want to go back to Egypt? Why are we the people so afraid of each other, so resentful of racial differences or fearful of sexual orientation differences? Why do people throughout the world let money and power, religion and politics divide us so deeply? Why do we turn to gods of metal for protection, fiery serpents that descend from the sky indiscriminately?

Of course the poor innocent snake, in a real case of snakebite, is generally defending itself against some intruder on the basis of a natural and legitimate fear. The human heart, by contrast, seems capable of generating venom and fear and hostility without much rhyme or reason. And like the Hebrew children in the desert, we too must contend not with one source of suffering but

with many.

Years ago in conversation with my sons, still children, we were sharing differences in different nations. "Many people from other nations have trouble understanding the level of violence in our country..." I started to say sagely. My older son Luke broke in quite suddenly: "I have trouble understanding it too, Dad."

We need to move past our fear. We need to dare to grieve; we need to dare to call for real shared societal repentance and change. We need to hold up to the light the terrible level of violence which threatens to undo us as a people. It is no use running! It is not limited in our nation by class, by race or by neighborhood. It is urban, it is suburban, it is young, it is old. And it is time to set it up where it may be clearly seen, hold it up to the light and say-- "Enough. Christ is being crucified every time one more human life is destroyed. God, we need to be healed." It is time to take the violence which hides in the shadows and haul it out and look at it for what it is. It is time to acknowledge that every killing, every injury that happens among us kills each of us a little, injures us, numbs our minds, clouds our souls, hardens our hearts, exacerbates our fears, cuts us off from our neighbors.

On Wednesday evening we prayed for peace, and I shared concerns from my Brazilian brother Vando, a pastor in a suffering neighborhood in Northeast Brazil. His church is located in one of the poorest most struggling communities in the western hemisphere. In response to my inquiry, he requested: I Wish your church to pray for 1. The youth involved with alcohol and drugs. 2. Pregnant adolescents. 3. End violence toward women. 4. Pray for the construction of our church. After I shared these concerns, one of those present said: "It seems to me those concerns are just as appropriate for Schenectady—they could have come from here."

It is time to lift up the reality of suffering among us, which is crucifying Christ among us. We must look at it, in the light. Yet looking we must also be willing to hope! To look through it and beyond it, to the One who is the God of Christians and of Muslims and of Jews; the God of women as men; the God of Africans, Asians and Americans, of middle class and rich and poor people, gay people, straight people, you and me. To do this we will have to face not only a single act of violence or wrongdoing, but the fear that undoes us. But if we can offer it up to God, and see our common humanity against the backdrop of the cross on which Christ died, then we can learn some fresh hope. And then we can act with integrity and justice. And then we can live as signs of honesty and hope ourselves, live as we have never lived before, live as though we are one human family together until at last it is true.

The whole world may live in fear of snakebite, and bite back, for that matter. But we who live in the shadow of the cross, we lift our eyes up to see Jesus raised up on high, crucified and yet made whole, defeated, yet raised up to new life. And if we let it happen, we can experience the healing which is available from this strange sign of God's love. For we can see broken humanity healed and raised up too.

The priest Henri Nouwen once said: "Keep your eyes on the Prince of Peace, the one who doesn't cling to his divine power; the one who refuses to turn stones into bread, jump from great heights, and rule with great power; the one who says, 'blessed are the poor, the gentle, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers,

and those persecuted for justice.’ See the one who touches the lame, the crippled, and the blind; the one who speaks words of forgiveness and encouragement; the one who dies alone, rejected, and despised. Keep your eyes on him who becomes poor with the poor, weak with the weak, and who is rejected with the rejected. That one, Jesus, is the source of all peace.” (Quoted by Father John Dear, from *Finding my Way Home*, pp 80-81)

When once we have looked human suffering in the face, and experienced the soul-power and grace which can and will cut through the fiery venom and the fearful anger which is so much a part of our world, we can never go back to the old way. We can never turn back to slavery’s comfort, never be afraid to face the guns and the fires, the bigotry and the greed, not any more. Not any more. Then we will start to walk by faith. We will reach out with healing, as we have been healed. We will respond instead of running; we will love instead of fearing. This is the way of the cross of Jesus. And it is profoundly hopeful, because it believes that violence and injustice is not the last word. Not for any of us. Not for humanity. There is something far far better ahead.

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*INTRODUCTION TO NUMBERS 21.4-9

By Lynn Carman Bodden

There are passages in scripture that are perplexing in their presentation of God. This morning’s reading from Numbers is one of them. We who claim and preach a God of profound love and radical welcome recoil at the depiction of a deity who metes suffering out upon a people for complaining, who contradicts recently handed down teachings about killing and idols, whose impulsive nature often seems to make life that is already difficult even more challenging for a chosen people.

It may help us to remember that our earliest stories of the God of covenant were handed down by people trying to live into a monotheistic relationship in a culture that had a host of gods that explained the world around them: the weather, the waters, the skies, the plants, the animals. The people of this morning’s story, those following Moses in the wilderness, had left behind the land of Egypt where beetles were sacred, and cats, and jackals, and where the king, the Pharaoh, wore a headdress adorned by a snake. Perhaps this desert story depicts in some way a wrestling between the ancient snake god and YHWH, where YHWH prevails. Perhaps the reason the people imagine that God sends snakes, is to remind themselves in their longing to return to Egypt of the horrors of the Pharaoh’s hard heart and harsh rule they have left behind.

This small story is one in a series of five of the people’s complaints and God’s response. Although in this story there is suffering, there is also a saving hope. The God of covenant does not leave the people to suffer and die, but offers them a way to live fully in freedom, in health, in wholeness.