

Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21

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[Jesus said,]¹⁴ “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Humanity be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ For God so loved the world that God gave the 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.”

My family took a lot of car trips when I was a child—lots and lots of loooong car trips--the kind that require patience, perseverance, and mutual forbearance. Unfortunately, my brother and I, who were strapped into the backseat with the lunch cooler, maps, and whatever odds and ends wouldn't fit into the trunk, often did not rise to the occasion.

As we got more and more whiny and combative, our parents would first try to distract us with games; then they'd offer some kind of a snack; then a warning; and finally, the car would pull to the side of the road to let us out. “We'll meet you in a mile,” my mother would say, and then the car would pull away and leave us in a cloud of exhaust.

It was a lesson in natural consequences. And that's what the Israelites got in our Numbers passage today. Natural consequences. For my brother and me, it was a hot, dusty walk. For the Israelites, it was snakes.

But the snakes didn't come right away. God was patient. After all, there's no question that what they were going through was terrifying and arduous—escaping Egypt with Pharaoh's army at

their heels, wandering in a desert with no food or water to be seen. By the time we drop into the story, they've been at this journey so long that the generation that left Egypt is starting to die off.

And like my parents, God has tried to work with them. Parting the sea so that they could escape. Providing water straight out of a rock. Sending food down from the sky. But somehow, it wasn't enough. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?" they complain to God, "There is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food."

That's my favorite line in that passage. "There is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." It reminds me of that old joke, where the two guys are in a restaurant. "The food here is terrible," says the first one. "Yeah," the second agrees, "and such small portions!"

You see, there *is* food—God has gone to great lengths to see to that. It just isn't the food they want. And much like a mother who slaves in the kitchen all afternoon, only to have her family turn up their noses, God has had it.

The passage says that God "sent" snakes, but remember that the people are in the wilderness of Sinai, where there is a very healthy snake population. God didn't have to send them: they were already there. The most common of the poisonous snakes in that region is the Levant Viper. One website describes the Levant Viper as having "an irritable disposition." So you can see that the snakes and the people have something in common. With all those irritable snakes around, it may just be that the people finally stumble upon a nest, many of them get bitten and die, and the people see it as punishment.

So the survivors turn to Moses in their terror and their grief. "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you," they say. "Pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us."

So Moses entreats God to help, and God answers the prayer—but not by getting rid of the snakes. Instead, God directs Moses to make a bronze snake and put it high on a pole where everyone can see it. The real snakes are still there, slithering through the sand. But whenever anyone gets bitten by one of them, all they have to do is look at the snake on the pole, and the snake bite won't hurt them.

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Humanity be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

That's Jesus speaking now, in the Gospel of John. Jesus, comparing himself and his crucifixion to a snake on a pole. They're pretty different, of course. Jesus wasn't a snake that killed; Jesus was a savior who healed. Yet somehow, in looking to both of them, people could be saved.

I think of the rule for helping someone who has an addiction. The best way to help is *not* to help. Not to cover for them; not to rescue them. Because as long as they're shielded from the consequences of their behavior, they can keep denying that they have a problem.

Of course, there's real danger in letting someone hit rock bottom. They could lose their job, lose their family, even lose their life, the way the first Israelites who were bitten died out there in the wilderness. But as long as someone is enslaved by their addiction, they aren't truly alive, anyway.

The hope in letting go, in refusing to protect someone from the snakes that threaten, is that they will finally look those snakes in the eye, and admit that they have a problem. That's the first step—right?—in any twelve-step program. Admit that you are powerless over whatever has you in its grip.

So, the snake was put up on high—the symbol of fear and ingratitude and unfaithfulness. The symbol of all the ways in which the people had gone wrong.

A snake in the grass is sly and hidden, just waiting to bite you at any moment. But a snake on a pole is lifted up where everyone can see it—a reminder of sin, and of its deadly consequences. A reminder not to fall back into denial, but to acknowledge the forces of destruction, so that those forces will no longer have the power to poison our lives.

“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.” That’s all well and good, and it answered the problem of the moment. But it didn’t answer the larger problem.

Because if all we do is acknowledge our sin, then we may respond not with healing, but with despair and self-hatred. We don’t need consequences alone; we also need the promise of grace—the promise that we are still loved, in spite of our weaknesses and our missteps. The promise that we still have value in the eyes of God. The promise that, if we face our truth, there will be something truly good waiting for us on the other side of rehab.

It’s like my favorite quote from Marjorie Thompson’s book on *Forgiveness* that Elizabeth Goodrich has been leading us through on Wednesday nights. She writes, “Judgment without mercy is brutal; mercy without judgment is anemic.” In our two passages today—with the snake on the pole in one of them, and Christ on the cross in the other—we see judgment and mercy side by side. And in those two things, together, lies the hope for a better future.

This past year, so many poisons that have slithered, unseen, for years, have been raised up high. The video of George Floyd’s murder; the killings of Ahmaud Arbury and Breonna Taylor—these forced those of us who are white to see the blatant and murderous racism that still has so much power in American society.

The Pandemic threw into sharp relief the growing chasm between rich and poor in our nation; the educational inequities and the lack of crucial internet access for those in poor or rural communities; the lack of protections and even health care for “essential” workers; and the hugely unequal amount of responsibility that women shoulder for childcare and elder care and household management.

Snake after snake after snake: there they are, for all the world to see.

But the point of the snake on the pole isn't just to engender fear. And it is absolutely not to engender worship. The snake is not a gilded idol, it is a cautionary tale. It is there to keep us honest, and it is there to make us change.

Because where grace enters in, is in the promise that change is possible.

“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Friends, as things begin to ease back into a sense of normalcy, we can't slip back into blindness or complacency, because that will turn around to bite us. Having had our eyes opened; having seen what we've seen, let's now turn from the snake, and toward the cross, because in looking toward Christ, we see the way to healing.

The way to healing lies in seeing and speaking truth, persistently and courageously as Christ did, even if it costs us.

The way to healing lies in aligning ourselves with those who suffer the most harm from the present systems, as Christ did. That means standing in solidarity with people of color. With non-citizens. With the poor ones who are cast aside; the old ones warehoused in nursing homes;

the uninsured ones left to fend for themselves. Those without access to housing or health care or the basic necessities of life. Those whose labor is exploited, those who are abused.

The way to healing, in other words, leads to the cross. But the cross, by the grace of God, leads to new life for ourselves and for the world.

That's what we see when we see Jesus lifted up on the cross. The snake? That's our sin, our particular destructive tendencies, which we have to acknowledge or they'll turn around and bite us. But Jesus? He's God's grace and goodness embodied—the sign that God still cares deeply enough to bear our hurts with us—even when we bring them on ourselves—and lead us toward wholeness.

“God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

A snake on a pole is better than a snake in the grass, any day. But God's love lifted high, for all the world to see? That's even better, still.