

Attention, Please!

Jesus said, “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.” If that seems like a strange comment, it’s partly because we’re coming into the middle of a conversation. It’s been no more than a day or two since Jesus overturned the moneychangers’ tables, throwing down a gauntlet that the Temple authorities couldn’t ignore. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, has come to Jesus by night. He may be hoping to catch Jesus in heresy, or he may be genuinely interested to hear what this fiery young Galilean has to say. By the time we tune in, Jesus has flummoxed Nicodemus with talk of being born again of water and the Spirit, questioned the Pharisee’s ability to educate his people, and pointed out that no one except the Son of Man – a title Nicodemus would recognize from the Book of Daniel but probably wouldn’t immediately associate with Jesus – has ever gone into or come from Heaven. Then, Jesus brings up the snake.

Our reading from the Book of Numbers gives us the odd little story to which Jesus refers. Moses and the Israelites are in the latter half of their trek through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Having been denied safe passage through Edom, they have to take the long walk around it. The people are fed up with travel and start grumbling. There’s no water, no food, they’re sick of eating manna... Like the generation that first set out from Egypt, they complain against God and Moses until Adonai is as frustrated with them as they are with him. He sends fiery serpents whose burning poison kills many. Repentant and afraid, the people beg Moses to ask Adonai to take the snakes away. Moses prays, and Adonai tells him to make a bronze snake and hoist it on a pole. Anyone who gets bitten only has to look up at the bronze snake and they will live.

(On a side note, a parishioner recently asked why I refer to the Father as Adonai. There are two reasons. First, I’ve noticed that some people refer to the Father as God, call Jesus by

name, and neglect to mention the Holy Spirit at all. That practice incorrectly implies, at least to me, that only the Father is God even though all three Persons of the Trinity are divine. Second, our Jewish cousins believe that the Father's name is too sacred to be spoken aloud. They write his name as the Tetragrammaton (יהוה), but substitute Adonai (אֲדֹנָי), which means "our Lord," when speaking of him. It's a practice I've adopted out of respect for Hebrew tradition.)

Nicodemus would have known the story of the bronze serpent, but he might have wondered why Jesus brought it up. Modern preachers tend to skip over it, going straight to the passage that Martin Luther called "the Gospel in miniature": "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." We'll get there, but the bronze serpent has much to teach us, so let's look at it first.

Any Biblical reference to serpents has to take us back to the serpent in Eden, the liar who engineered humanity's fall from grace. Adonai punished the serpent not only by making it crawl in the dust but by creating hostility between snakes and humanity, so that we would crush their heads and they would strike our heels. The biting serpents in Numbers are merely living out the curse Adonai pronounced upon their ancestor. Painful and deadly as their bite may be, however, Adonai doesn't take the snakes away when Moses prays. Instead, he tells Moses to make a bronze snake and mount it on a pole where the people can see it. That presents a design problem. Several varieties of live snakes use their scales and abdominal muscles to climb trees, but an inanimate statue of a snake would slide right off a pole – unless it was nailed to the pole or, more probably, held up by a crossbeam. Add that beam and, suddenly, you don't have a snake on a stick. You have a snake on a cross, which means that the Hebrew people are being instructed to seek healing by looking at an image that prefigures the Crucifixion centuries before anyone knew it was coming.

Nicodemus doesn't know it yet, but Jesus is the Messiah who rescues humankind from the malice of Eden's serpent. He willingly ascends to his own cross because, as he tells the Pharisee, our Father loves the world enough to send his Son to break the serpent's curse and bring everlasting life to those of us who believe in him. That life is available to all of us but, like Moses' traveling companions, we have to redirect our attention. The Israelites made the very human mistake of becoming so focused on their physical discomforts and preferences that they actually complained about being allowed to eat the bread of Heaven. They got so tired of being on the road that they forgot to be grateful for their deliverance from slavery or awestruck by the privilege of traveling in the physical presence of God. Any of us could make their mistakes – at some point, all of us probably have. For all its blessings and wonders, the world isn't an entirely comfortable place. It's easy to get fixated on our problems, be they minor annoyances or crises that threaten our lives the way the fiery snakes threatened the Israelites. And when all of our attention is focused on our troubles, we can easily forget that the remedy is to look up to the God whose gracious self-sacrifice saved us and whose love comforts and heals us when we're injured by the poisonous bites of a painful world.

The Israelites might have doubted at first when Moses told them that, if they looked at the brass serpent, they would be healed. Surely, that was too simple – wasn't there something they had to *do* to be protected from the snakes and their venom? No, there was not. Scripture tells us, however, that once the Israelites understood the healing power of the brass serpent, they carried it with them into the Promised Land and kept it for generations. Unfortunately, over time they forgot why the brass serpent was made and where its power came from. They turned it into an idol, just as we moderns idolize fad diets, fitness gurus and so-called "miracle cures." Ultimately, King Hezekiah had to destroy the brass serpent because his subjects started burning

incense and worshipping it. They needed to be reminded, just as we sometimes do, that healing is a gracious gift from God, not something we can get from an idol or accomplish entirely on our own. Bad things will happen. We will get sick and injured and, eventually, all of us pass away. That's how the world works. But Jesus has promised eternal life to those of us who believe in him. If we focus our attention on him, the other things don't hurt as much.

John's Gospel is filled with dualities – above and below, hurt and healing, dark and light. Bible scholars disagree on why Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. The Pharisee might have been trying not to be seen, or he might have meant to honor Jesus by paying him a visit at the end of a long, exhausting day. Then again, perhaps Nicodemus was simply stuck in the darkness that can capture any of us, and his visit to Jesus was an instinctive attempt to move closer to the healing light that Jesus always carries with him.

As Jesus observes, there are people who prefer the darkness because it conceals the evil things they do. For most of us, though, and perhaps especially for those of us who follow Jesus, the more time we spend in his heavenly light, the better. When we devote all our attention to worrying about our problems or trying to fix them by ourselves, we can forget that the remedy for our afflictions is to pay more attention to Jesus. It's not that we shouldn't do what we can to take care of ourselves, it's simply recognizing that reliance on ourselves and others only goes so far. We needn't be afraid to approach him. Jesus came to us because God – Adonai, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit – loves us and wants us to have eternal life. There's nothing scary about that.

Just as the Israelites were coming to the end of their journey, we're coming to the end of our annual journey of Lent. Soon, we'll walk with Jesus through Holy Week, from the gates of Jerusalem to the Cross and beyond. If the story breaks your heart, and sometimes it will, don't carry your sorrow alone. Look up to Jesus, tell him what troubles you, and be healed. *Amen.*