

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT | MARCH 10, 2024

NUMBERS 21:4-9 | PSALM 107:1-3, 17-22 | EPHESIANS 2:1-10 | JOHN 3:14-21

In this season of Lent, I've mentioned more than a few times just how great our Hebrew Bible readings are. Some of you may remember that way back in the first week of Lent, I said that four of our five Old Testament readings are about God's covenants. There's one that's not, I mentioned, but we'll deal with that later. Well, now is later.

Today's reading comes from the book of Numbers. Numbers is not a book that we hear from a lot in worship.¹ I think we'll only hear from it one more time this year. But it has characters and themes that you're probably familiar with because it overlaps with the much of Exodus. Some of the characters are the same. We still have Moses and Miriam. Some of the settings are the same. Think of Mt. Sinai. And some of the problems are the same, too. In the case of today's reading, the people won't stop complaining.

While traveling through the wilderness, "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.'" And the authors say that God—increasingly frustrated by all the complaining—responded by sending a plague of poisonous snakes.² And apparently this intervention worked. The people came to Moses, confessed their lack of trust, and asked for the snakes to be taken away.

This is where—for our purposes—the story takes an important turn. If God did send the snakes, then, in theory, God could just get rid of the snakes. But instead, God proposes an unorthodox solution. "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses did as he was told. And "whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live."

The setup in the story is kind of strange. But it's the remedy that's really significant. Because this is not a story about how you should complain less or why we don't like snakes. It's a story about how we find healing and wholeness, restoration and peace.

Oftentimes, when we are dealing with a problem, we hold out hope that it will simply go away. And so we try to find ways to distract ourselves, take our mind off it, not pay attention to it. If that worked, then you could have an alternate ending of this story in which Moses goes to God and says, "What should I do for these people? And God might reply, "Just keep them busy. Take them for a walk. Put a show on. I don't know."

And yet, in this story, the solution lies in looking at the problem, the hurt, and the loss head on. It means actually dealing with the thing that's ailing us.

Imagine what would happen, for example, if you were having neck pain, and you went to the doctor and said, "I'm open to any treatments, as long as they don't involve my neck." Or if you tried to help your neighbors experiencing housing and food insecurity but decided that you wanted to do it without providing housing or food. Or if you were having relationship problems, so you went to a couples therapist and said, "I'll be totally honest with you about everything except our

¹ The Aaronic blessing from Numbers 6 is used frequently, however.

² The word for "snake" is the same word for seraphs used in Isaiah 6, which may suggest that people thought they had some divine origin. It's interesting, but not really what we want to focus on today.

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relationship.” It would be difficult to get much of anywhere. It’s difficult to make much progress unless you face the snake.

St. John understood that. Today we heard a reading from one of the most important scenes in John’s gospel. Nicodemus, a leader of the Pharisees, has come to Jesus to try to figure out who he is and what his mission is. And perhaps since their both Jews, Jesus explains himself using a story from scripture. And out of all the possible stories that Jesus could choose from—the escape from Egypt, the expulsion from Eden, the covenant after the flood—John’s Jesus explains himself using this seemingly obscure story from Numbers. “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.”

Jesus draws a connection between Moses’s bronze serpent and his death and resurrection. Jesus draws a visual connection between the lifting up of the serpent and his own crucifixion. But even more important, Jesus suggests that he is here to offer us life in God, what St. John calls eternal life. And the way that Jesus offers us eternal life is by experiencing and overcoming death.

Jesus does not heal us by standing back at a distance and casually offering words of advice on what he would do. And Jesus does not eliminate all the perils of living by doing some magic trick. Jesus heals us by taking our experiences, our losses, and our griefs and bringing them into the inexhaustible divine life.

Gregory of Nazianzus, the fourth century bishop of Constantinople, summed this up well when he said that, “That which is not assumed is not healed.” In other words, unless it’s actually experienced, unless it’s actually seen, unless it’s actually faced, it can’t be healed.³

How does Jesus defeat temptation? By being tempted. How does Jesus heal our estrangement from God? By experiencing our estrangement from God. How does Jesus overcome our rejection of others? By being rejected. How does Jesus conquer death? By dying.

This is why St. John uses this Numbers story to explain Jesus’s death and resurrection. That in the cross, we see the very worst of what we do to one another. And at the same time, we encounter the depth of God’s mercy, the extent of God’s compassion for us. That God experiences our death so that we might experience God’s life.

This doesn’t get rid of the snakes, of course. Life goes on biting you. But it gives us the tenacity to go on living, facing them head on. Our sense of separation from God is real. But in Christ, God has already returned to us. Our rejection of one another is real. But in Christ, God accepts us without condition. Death is real. But in Christ, we always die into God’s unending life.

Face the snake, the author of Numbers says, and you will find healing.

Follow the way of Jesus’s cross, St. John tells us, and you will find eternal life.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

³ See Kathy Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 28. Also Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 180.

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