

Numbers 21:4-9, Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22, Ephesians 2:4-10, John 3:14-21

“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.”

I think this passage about the bronze serpent on the pole is one of the strangest passages in Scripture. And that’s saying something! It’s odd in itself, to have a bronze statue of a snake on a pole serve as a healing tool. It’s odd, too, that God is having Moses cast a bronze image of an animal, when Aaron’s creation of a golden calf as an idol to worship was such a disaster.

I’ve read commentaries and even heard seminary lectures about the bronze serpent. I’ve learned that similar items existed in other cultures as well, where representations of venomous snakes were thought to be able to somehow undo the harm of a snakebite. But none of this really made the story seem less bizarre to me.

As I read through the story this week, I contemplated the whole situation in which this strange event occurred.

The people of Israel have been wandering in the desert a long time. So long that Aaron, their high priest, has just died of old age. And they are weary, and they are becoming impatient. And then they make this complaint:

“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.”

The strange thing about this complaint is that they complain that there is no food, and then in the very same sentence say “we detest this miserable food”. They do have food, though they are no longer happy with it. The food they are complaining about is manna, the bread of heaven, which God has been feeding them with this whole time.

And so, for their grumbling and their ingratitude for the food that God has been miraculously providing, we hear that God sends venomous snakes into the camp, and many people die from snakebites.

And when this happens the people of Israel recognize their ungratefulness and their need for God, and they repent of their ingratitude, and ask God for forgiveness. And they ask Moses, “Pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.”

But that is not what God does. The serpents remain. Instead, God provides a treatment for when someone does get bitten. A person who is bitten must look up at the image of the snake, and if they do, the poison will do them no harm, and they will live.

God doesn’t take away the snakes. He doesn’t remove the object of complaint as he so often has done for the Israelites in the past. The old pattern was for the Israelites to have a complaint, such as “we have no food”, and God would remove the problem, in that case by providing manna, and then the Israelites would get used to the manna and complain about it instead.

But this time God has not removed the serpents from the camp, He's just offered a way for the Israelites to survive. And that's a very interesting way of handling the problem. I suspect it was a lot harder for the Israelites to take this solution for granted. They can't just get used to no snakes again, and find some new thing to complain about.

Instead, they are reminded again and again, faced again and again with these snakes, the consequences of their sin and ingratitude. And every time they feel again the sting of the snakebite that results from their sin, they look up to the bronze serpent, and God miraculously heals them, and they are reminded how entirely they depend on God. They can't easily take that for granted.

That seems to me to be the heart of the message of this story. We need God, but we so often take for granted His many gifts – of health, and livelihood, and life itself. And we will forget our need for God if we don't encounter reminders of how He saves and takes care of us. And so in the wilderness, God found a way to remind the Israelites of their need for Him, and they experienced again and again the *miracle* of His healing and His preserving them in life.

Jesus refers directly to this story in our reading today from the Gospel according to John, while speaking to the Pharisee Nicodemus about how Jesus himself will be “raised up”, like the bronze serpent in the wilderness.

He is speaking of being raised on the Cross, and it's an interesting thought to compare the way that we look to the Cross with the way the Israelites looked to the bronze serpent.

The Cross of Christ, if we think of it in this way, is a reminder to us. It reminds us of the seriousness of sin – of our own sins. It reminds us of the danger and cost of sin to us, but even more, it reminds us of the cost of sin *to God*. The price *God* was willing to pay to heal the damage of sin in our relationships with Him.

God could have fixed the problem of sin by taking it away and making us unable to sin. But to do that He would have had to take away our choice – our free will, and we would be like slaves, or robots, who could not make a decision of our own to serve Him out of love.

So He did not take away every instance of sin, just as He didn't take away the serpents. But He offered us peace and healing and salvation anyway. He lived a perfect human life, as an example to us of how to live as humans. And then He laid down His life, in a painful and costly way, and showed us how deep His love is for us, and how much He is willing to give, and to suffer, to be in relationship with us.

And then He rose again, and offered us a new hope – that sin, and death, and despair do not have the last word in human life. That resurrection is possible. That redemption is possible. That life continues after our failures, mistakes, sins, and even after our own deaths.

And when we look to the Cross, perhaps we might remember that. Perhaps it might help us not to take God's love so much for granted. Perhaps it might heal our hearts.

Perhaps, as we make our way toward Holy Week – toward the betrayal and the Cross and the burial and the Resurrection – this healing image we have before us may help us to remember our own need for God, and the deep and costly way He chose to offer us His peace and His love.