

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

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
4th Sun. in Lent, March 22, 2009

God's Antidote

Many of us have fears of things. Some fear death. Some fear flying in airplanes. My daughter fears spiders. I fear snakes. Today's passage takes a common fear, turns it into healing, and connects its message to Jesus Christ. Many passages in the Old Testament are connected to Christ and relate to our own lives as well.

Our Old Testament passage takes place when Moses and the Israelites leave Mt. Hor and journey south around Edom. The story moves quickly without giving too many details. Since most of the Old Testament stories have been passed down by word of mouth, it is not surprising that some details have either been lost or some simply forgotten.

These verses describe the last recorded occasion in which the Israelites grumble their discontent about the quality of food from Yahweh and their desire for the bodily comforts they left behind in Egypt. They describe the God-provided manna as worthless bread. This time, their complaining does not lead to better food and water from God. Instead it brings an act of divine judgment from Yahweh. Fiery serpents are sent to live among the Israelites, and many die or suffer from their bites. The Israelites who spoke against God and against Moses confess their sin and beg Moses to become a go-between for them. Moses' prayers and pleas for them are heard and answered. Moses is instructed by God to make a model of one of these fiery serpents and set it up on a pole. Moses makes one of bronze, and sets it up as God directs him, so the people can see it. The Israelites who are bitten

and are to look upon this bronze serpent to be healed of the serpents' bites and live.

These fiery serpents are not simply a natural disaster. They are divine agents of punishment together with potential healing, both sent by God.

This story illustrates a problem which is typical in the wilderness tradition. It seems the farther Israel moves away from Egypt, the more the people remember what they used to have in Egypt, despite being slaves of the Egyptians. They do not seem to remember, though, the burden of abuse under the Egyptians. They only remember the guaranteed food supply the Egyptian empire always gives to cheap labor. That selective memory contrasts with their current circumstances of few supplies, dependence on Yahweh, and dangers in the wilderness. The Israelites become impatient, argumentative, whiny, and resistant.

In this unhappy situation, the Israelites, argue, accuse Yahweh of being unfaithful to them, and accuse Moses of being a poor leader. This is what people often do when the economy fails. Israel's relationship with Yahweh seems to be one of irritating honesty. Sometimes the complaining produces good results from God. But not this time! We are not told why God does not help them. We can guess He is tired of hearing their complaints and reacts in a harsh and uncooperative way. Instead of giving them what they want, God creates a terrible punishment for them. He sends an invasion of snakes, fiery serpents, and creeping things, many of which are poisonous. God's actions show His displeasure with their grumblings and their lack of appreciation.

The people do not expect this response and become fearful as many are bitten and some die from the venom. The people who complain now become repentant and submissive. When God's people change their tune from grumbling to repenting, God also changes and provides a way for healing.

By experiencing God's devastating power, the Israelites, who are by nature impatient, realize they have to come to terms with God's authority. They discover their rebelling is not only futile but also self-destructive. Israel gives in, even though God does not immediately remove the terrible life-threatening serpents. Moses exercises his job as a go-between on behalf of the people. Moses prays to Yahweh, and Yahweh answers.

Through these events, God tries to show His people that when they rebel and accuse, God responds negatively. But when they repent, God responds positively. We recognize here evidence of God's power to either give life or to cause death. Yahweh directs Moses to provide a bronze replica of the destructive serpents and to set it up to be visible to the Israelites. It is to be used as an antidote to the poisonous serpents.

On the surface, this seems to be an odd, almost magical solution to a breakdown in their covenantal relationship with God. Not only is this image a symbol of God's generous, faithful capacity to save and to let Israel live, but the image is understood in the story to have real, effective power of salvation. Israel is encouraged to look and live.

We may doubt the healing powers of the bronze serpent because it seems to hint strongly of magical, primitive ways. There are two responses to our struggle against our scientific natures. First, the serpent of bronze seems to have a somewhat sacred influence on the Israelites. Its purpose is no different from the claims that our bread and wine present the body and blood of our Lord, given to save us. Both the image of the serpent and our view of the sacrament in our lives remind us that God's life-giving power is given in ways which are not always understood by our technological thinking. Second, the Gospel reading of John 3:14-16 understands the lifted-up bronze serpent to be an anticipation of the lifted up or Crucified Christ. It is beyond our usual reasoning to understand how our Crucified Christ can have saving power in this world. As strange as that concept is, our lifted up Christ is at the very center of our existence. These passages invite us to be re-centered around that gift of new life.

The special value of this Old Testament story comes from the fact that our Lord Himself chooses it to illustrate possibly the greatest words in all of Scripture about the Gospel, John 3:14-16, where the comparison is given in unmistakable terms. "And 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. For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him, may not perish but have everlasting life."

Here we have the best illustration of the meaning of salvation. We want to remember that the Old Testament is almost like "God's picture book," compiled to teach us the truths of grace. We also want to realize some of

these old stories throw wonderful light on the New Testament teaching of salvation, helping us to grasp them more fully and truly. This may be a reason Christ uses this story, to such effect, with Nicodemus earlier in John 3.

This story also presents us with two features about the nature of sin. Jesus tells us that sin is like the mortal bite of a poisonous serpent. Sin bites like a serpent and stings like an adder, inflicting terrible wounds on people's souls. To be a sinner means to be in serious need of healing. With a serpent bite, time is of the essence if life is to be saved. This is the aspect of sin which calls for the compassion and pity of God, and the tender care of the great Physician Himself, Christ Jesus our Lord.

Also, the serpents are sent to Israel as a punishment for their complaining. Jesus tells us that sin is a revolt against God and His will for us.

The uplifted bronze serpent reminds us of sin being judged and canceled. Once the people confess and request prayer by Moses, God gives them an antidote through the bronze serpent. So, also, for our sakes and our healing, Christ is made in the likeness of our sinful flesh. Christ Jesus is lifted up from the earth when He bears on His own body the sins of the world. We are told to look upon and believe in the uplifted Christ for our forgiveness. Jesus Christ becomes our antidote. We do not need a bronze serpent. We have someone much stronger. We have Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

May we always remember Christ dies to save us from our sins. Christ tells us: “I am with you. I will not ever leave you. My love is stronger than your fear. Look at me.” May we always look to our lifted up Savior and call on Him to help us as only He can. Amen.