

## Fourth Sunday in Lent “Choose God”

Num 21:4-9; Ps 107:1-3, 17-22; Eph 2:1-10; Jn 3:14-21

Today we have the classic verse: John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.” This is a verse that just about everyone knows, but people often fail to go beyond that great verse. Most people just skip over the enigmatic statement that Jesus says to Nicodemus immediately before this famous verse. Jesus says, “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.” [3.14-15]. Jesus’ intent would be clear to an audience who knew their Hebrew Scripture, but today we often fail to grasp the historical depth & significance of what Jesus says.

Jesus specifically refers to an historical event when the children of Israel were nearing the end of their wilderness wanderings in the Sinai desert. After 40 years in the wilderness, the first generation of Hebrew slaves has mostly died and the next generation is once again grumbling and murmuring against God and Moses. Despite the fact that, in the midst of a desert, God has provided water from the rock and manna from heaven, the people claim that they “have no food or water.” The biblical text says that the people sinned against God, so God sent serpents into their midst and the people died when bitten. The people then admit that, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord..., pray to the Lord to take away the serpents.” [Num 21.5-7]

And, as we heard today, God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent and to raise it up on a wooden pole. Thereafter, anyone who is guilty of sin and consequently bitten merely need come forward to the pole, look up, and they will be healed. The fact is that by coming forward, they have to expose themselves as sinners and put their trust in God alone. The serpent, hanging on a wooden pole, offered salvation, to those who came forward to choose God over self. Thus, the people were delivered from the snake’s poison and, more importantly, their relationship with God was healed and restored. They had turned from the darkness of sin and into the light of God’s presence once again.

Jesus is saying the same thing to Nicodemus [who comes undercover of night]. Jesus knows that humanity still wanders in the wilderness; a wilderness of our own making—our own corporate, communal, and personal “Wilderness of Sin.” Worse, we are effectively dead because, *sin* is anything that separates us from God. Over a thousand years later, Jesus sees no difference between the grumbling, sinning, snake-bitten, desert-wandering Israelites, than he does the broken humanity all around him.

And yet, despite the “Walking-Dead, Snake-bitten Humanity” around him, Jesus, Son of God, has mercy, just as his Father God, had mercy in the Sinai Wilderness. As Paul says so eloquently in Ephesians, “Even though we were dead through our sins, God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, made us alive in Christ.” [para Eph 2.4-5]

And so, just as God had Moses “lift-up the serpent on a wooden pole” so that those who chose to come forward in faith might be saved by choosing God over self; so Jesus now offers *himself* to be “lifted-up on a wooden pole” that he might not only bear the sin of the people, but the sin of whole world. So that all those who choose to come forward, who choose to expose themselves as ones who have been “bitten by sin,” might be restored to fullness with God in Christ Jesus.

I saw a stunning contemporary image of this concept in a church I once visited. It was a modern church with a huge mosaic cross over the Lord’s Table. However, instead of a mosaic made from various stones or ceramic bits, all of the pieces were tiny mirrors! The cross itself was a huge mirror and it reflected the faces of the people in that worship space. In a sense, that cross bore the image of the very humanity that had also raised a wooden cross on Mount Calvary. In other words, reflected in that mirrored cross was the sin of the world. Yet, that same mirrored cross also reflected light. It gathered all the light in the church and

reflected it out onto the people; because all those who chose to come and worship were like the snake-bitten, sinners who came forward in faith. The faces reflected in that mirrored-cross are the ones who had chosen God over self; those who had dared to come forward into the light of the cross.

Lent is the season for us to acknowledge our willful desire to follow our own hearts, our own paths, our own self. Lent is a time to acknowledge our love of the darkness. But, Lent is also a season to realize that the light is available to all. Just as food and water were available to the Israelites in the wilderness, God's unfathomable love and radical mercy are available to all who turn to God in faith and desire to choose God over self.

What Jesus is telling Nicodemus is that: all have sinned and all have a choice to come forward, like those bitten by the snake had a choice to admit their sin and to come forward—and that choice offers life. That means that we have a part to play in the process of salvation, not by doing “good works” to earn our way back into relationship, but through our faith, our trust in God. Jesus promises that if we step forward to look at his cross, to choose God over self, then we step into life—eternal life.

*“Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, and his mercy endures for ever.” Ps 107:1*

### **What are the implications and meanings for you in today's readings?**

1. Even today, the Sinai Desert is home to some of the world's deadliest vipers and cobras. The Israelites had good reasons to fear snakes. Although the story implies it, we know that merely putting a dead viper or a bronze replica on a stick for people to gaze at will not magically heal them. Spend some time reflecting on this story:

- a. How might the replica of a snake affect the rampant fear or superstition of the people?
- b. Other than, our public Confession of Sin done in common worship and the option for private personal confession, our Episcopal tradition does not institutionally require personal public confessions. Yet, this is what was required of the Israelites in the desert. Consider why.

2. Along similar lines, Jesus says, *“For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.”* (Jn. 3:20) Reflect on how this may connect to requiring the sinful Israelites to come forward publically to acknowledge their sinful ways.

- a. How would you feel having to come forward publically to acknowledge your sin?
- b. Has it occurred to you that that is what we Episcopalians really do at every Holy Eucharist?

3. Moses enjoined the people to quit focusing on themselves and to focus on the God who was leading them.

- a. What times in your life do you feel you have focused on yourself instead of God?
- b. The COVID pandemic has been difficult for many. Where is your focus now? On God or self?

### **For the Biblical Scholars**

- The “speaking against God and Moses” event in our passage from Numbers is merely one of many such events that occurred during the 40 years of wilderness wanderings. How many other times do we find similar situations during those wanderings and what were the results of those events?
- Why does Paul say that we are *“dead through trespasses and sins?”* [Eph 2:1] To whom is he speaking and to what “trespasses and sins” is he referring?
- What is the Hebrew word & meaning for what God told Moses to put on a pole? [It is not a snake!]