

The Good Serpent
Number 21:4-9
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For the next few Sundays, we're going to do something different! It's summer time; folks will be traveling and enjoying a break from their usual activities. So I've decided to take a little vacation from the revised common lectionary, which if you've noticed is the usual source for my sermons. I like the lectionary because it gives me a text – I don't get to choose something that reflects my pet peeve or favorite interest. It is the word of God coming to me from an outside source and then I have to hear something in it and try to make something out of it that speaks to us today! However, as wonderful as the lectionary is, it has its limitations. One of them being the impossibility of covering every story and every character that the Bible includes. And so for the next few weeks, for our church "summer vacation", we'll be looking some of the unfamiliar and unexpected stories and unsung heroes of the Bible because they too have a message for us today.

Today's story comes from the time of the Exodus. The Children of Israel had fled Egypt, accompanied by mighty signs and wonders, and had come at last to the borders of the Promised Land. Twelve spies were sent across the river Jordan into the lush and fertile land God had promised to them, but the reports brought back by the spies were not as promising as the land itself. The land was rich and fertile, but they said it was also filled with mighty warriors, giants almost in their size and strength. Ten of the scouts said there was no way that the Israelites, a rag-tag band of exhausted migrants, could conquer, much less evict such warriors.

But two spies, Joshua and Caleb, filed a minority report. They said the Israelites should cross over the river and enter the land because God had pledged this land to them, and God would therefore be their strength and their defense. However, the Children of Israel, even though they'd seen the parting of the Red Sea, and had experienced the Passover angel, decided to follow the advice of the ten fearful scouts. They broke camp and returned to the desert that they'd just crossed.

God was angry at their faithlessness, and decreed that they must wander for forty years in the desert they had chosen for themselves, until every one of them, save only Joshua and Caleb, was dead. So they wandered and tested God and one by one they died, until only their children survived them.

It was their children then, whom Moses, along with Joshua and Caleb, began to lead back towards the Promised Land, towards the end of the 40 years of wandering. But like their forebears, the men and women of this second generation began to complain and doubt as well. They complained against God and against Moses. They said things like, "Let us go back to Egypt. At least there we were fed and had homes we could live in in one place." They said also, "Who of us has seen God? To which of us has God spoken? Who among us can say he or she believes all the tales our fathers and mothers left us?" And then they complained about the food too, saying to 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."

Now granted, a diet of manna might have gotten a little boring after 40 years – 40 years, 365 days a year, three meals a day, that's 43,800 meals – that's a lot of manna pancakes, manna soufflé, manna soup, manna Stroganoff, manna a la king, baked, broiled, fried or fricassied manna, manna fritters, manna muffins, manna cookies – you get the idea. But it was a gift – they had not worked for it, they simply woke up each morning and gathered their daily supply of manna, food that the Psalmist would later call "the bread of angels" (Ps. 78) left for them overnight by the grace of God. And when they'd been thirsty, even though it wasn't exactly Starbucks, God had provided water for them from a rock in the desert. And when they'd really craved meat, God sent them quail, in great numbers, to satisfy their hungers. But it was never enough.

So God finally got angry; really angry with their continued ingratitude and lack of trust. And so, the story goes, God sent snakes into the camps to kill his ungrateful children. These weren't just any

snakes – they were fiery snakes, and they were God’s snakes, which somehow, of course, makes them good snakes. Some people find a similarity between these snakes and the seraphim – fiery angels of God, cousins perhaps to the six winged seraphs who surround the throne of God in Isaiah’s vision and who bring the fiery coal to touch Isaiah’s lips as he confesses his sinfulness. They are very scary angels. And these are very scary fiery snakes, and they were everywhere – in the tents, in the breadbaskets, in the cooking pots, in the bedrolls.

And Moses, for not the first time in this forty year saga, intervened on behalf of the people, asking for mercy on their behalf. God told Moses to take a brass vessel at the door of the tent of meeting and hammer it into the image of the serpents that were attacking the Israelites. Moses did this, and wound the brass snake around his staff, running through the camp, holding the staff up high and calling out to the people in their fear and their pain, “Look up! Look up and be saved! Look up and live!”

And the Bible says that those who believed Moses, those who stopped looking down at the snakes, who stopped trying to pull them off of themselves, but instead looked up at the brass snake, did not die. That doesn’t mean that they weren’t bitten, but simply that if they looked up at the brass snake and not down at the live snakes, they did not die of their wounds. Eighteen months later it was these men and women who walked across the dry bed of the Jordan to claim the land of milk and honey God had promised them so many years before.

The brass serpent apparently went with them, and continued to be regarded as holy for hundreds of years after the death of Moses and after the wandering Israelites had settled down in the land of milk and honey. Unfortunately, like so many objects first designed to assist people in their spiritual life, to help them become aware of God’s presence around them, the brass snake began to be worshipped as an idol, as an end in itself – and by the time of King Hezekiah, people were making sacrifices to it. And so Hezekiah, a man of God, a man who scripture says, “did what was right in the sight of the Lord as his ancestor David had done,” destroyed the bronze serpent, that had by that time been given the name Nehushtan. In 2Kings we read that Hezekiah in a decisive move to clean up lax worship practices and remove the gradual accretion of pagan practices and paraphernalia, “removed the high place, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan.”

But the snake story did not go into oblivion with the destruction of Nehushtan. Jesus himself referred to this story in John’s gospel when Nicodemas, a Pharisee, came by night to question Jesus. As familiar as we all may be with the words from John 3:16 – “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life,” we are probably not as familiar with the words that immediately precede them: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life.”

This is one of the times that Jesus, whom we Christians name as the Son of God, reaches back into the Torah – the old testament, the holy scriptures of his people – and “lays direct, specific claim to the events and actions of his human life as being re-enactments or realizations of specific events and actions in Jewish history.”¹ Here he equates Moses’ snake on stick to himself on a cross – both are means of salvation – means to health and to life. For the former, a means to physical health and salvation, and for the latter a means to spiritual or eternal health and salvation.

And both point the way to God. “God so loved the world,” Jesus tells Nicodemas. Neither was meant to be an end in itself. That is something we Christians sometimes tend to forget. The cross of Christ is a reminder to us of the love of God that transcends death and the power of God that conquers the forces of the world. The bronze serpent and the cross of Christ are alike in that they both point beyond themselves to the ultimate power, presence, grace, healing, and love of God. That is why the early church fathers referred to Jesus not only as the Good Shepherd but also as “the good serpent.”²

In his life on earth, Jesus always pointed beyond himself to God. He told his disciples, “If you have seen me, you have seen the father.” And in Mark’s gospel, when a man addressed Jesus as “Good teacher,” Jesus responded, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”

Sadly, the bronze serpent within a few generations became an end in itself, an idol, opaque, no longer letting through the light of God, no longer leading to a closer communion with God. And so it was destroyed. The cross of Christ, on the other hand, has endured these 2000 years because it has remained transparent to God. For us as Christians, if we want to see God, we can look at the cross and there we are led to understand a little bit better God’s unconditional love, sacrifice, and forgiveness. The cross is a sacrament – an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

In a few moments when we receive our offering, and it is brought forward by the ushers, we will lift it up towards this large cross behind me as we sing the doxology. Now, why do we do that? Is it because we think the cross has some magical powers? Is it because we are worshipping the cross? No. It is because the cross is a sacrament for us, a visible means by which we are brought into contact with an invisible reality, with the ground of our being, with the God who made us and formed us in God’s image and blew into us God’s breath of life. The God who has remained steadfast through the ages, who has communed with us through nature, world events, and through individual persons – patriarchs, matriarchs, prophets and kings, and who, we believe, has revealed God’s self to us most completely in the person of Jesus who himself was lifted up – on a cross – to die with us and for us – for the healing of the world. And when we do this, we stand in the presence of mystery – the mystery of God’s great and enduring love, God’s daring and intricate plan – which we receive by grace through faith and not by our own understanding.

Christians like their Israelite ancestors have a choice to look up in faith and trust for salvation – for health, healing, and wholeness – or to look away. Scripture says that whenever a person was bitten by a snake, that a person could look at the serpent of bronze and live. There were probably those who didn’t think that was necessary; they could take care of their snake bite themselves; it wasn’t anything they couldn’t handle on their own. They didn’t need the salvation God offered to them.

And Jesus tells Nicodemus that there are those who hate the light and refuse to come to it. I guess they think they can figure it all out in the dark for themselves. But there are some things that we just can’t do for ourselves. And self-salvation is one of them. I’m not exactly sure why looking to the cross works, but somehow when we are disobedient, or lost, or in rebellion against everything we know to be right and true, we can look at the cross and can see more clearly what our sin is. And somehow, when we are truly and deeply hurting, we can look at the cross and better understand our own pain. And, even though our pain may not be taken away, we can face it more courageously because we realize that Christ has endured that pain, and is one with us in it. I don’t know how it works, all I know is that to fully live we have to look up.

Perhaps all this is best said by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, who wrote “Therefore, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God“ (12:1-2). Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Phyllis Tickle, “A Serpent in the Desert,” 30 Good Minutes, Program #4906, November 6, 2005.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “Snake Savior,” *Sermons from Duke Chapel*, Will Willimon, ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 353.