

Fourth Sunday of Lent – Year B

We get to hang out with the Israelites in the desert again this morning. Last week in the reading from the book of Exodus, we heard the Ten Commandments, or the Ten Words – the way of life that God gave the people. Today we have one of only three passages from the Book of Numbers that appear in our lectionary readings – the scripture readings we hear on Sundays.

And the passage made me wonder if it was the origin of that expression that something may come back to bite you... The Israelites have been in the desert, the wilderness, for some time now – partly out of their own fear of actually *entering* the promised land. And this is one of about five descriptions of the people grumbling against Moses – and now God, too – because *what they had before*, what they left behind, *the way things used to be* was at least predictable. They knew how to be slaves in Egypt. There they had cucumbers and melons. In the wilderness, God has given them manna and quail. But what do they say? “For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” First there *is* no food – and then they *detest* this *miserable* food. Someone suggested that the Israelites – or at least some of them – were *so discontented* that they decided to head back toward Egypt on their own – and out in the desert wilderness, they encountered snakes, serpents, that had stayed away from the encampments of all the Israelites gathered together. The point here is that there are serpents all around... and if we venture away from the way of life God intends for us, we’re likely to run into them and get bitten by them. Our straying from the way of God will come back to bite us in the end!

But what is perhaps more interesting here is the “cure” that God proposes to Moses. God has Moses make a bronze or metal image of a serpent and put it on a pole. And when someone is bitten by a snake, that person is supposed to look up, and look *at* that image of a snake, the metal serpent, in order to be healed. Let’s get a clear picture of this. People are supposed to look directly *at* that which is their greatest fear. They are supposed to look at what is killing them. *That, says God, is how you will be healed.* And we are told that when anyone was bitten by a serpent, that person *would* look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Eventually that bronze serpent became an end in itself. The people gave it a name – Nehushtan – and began to worship *it*. What had been given by God as a means to

life got misused, misrepresented – and became an idol in itself. And so generations later, King Hezekiah had the bronze serpent destroyed.

So what does all this have to tell us today? One commentator put it this way:

“What matters ... is the idea that anything, regardless of its origin, can become an idol for the community of faith. It does not matter what the idol is made of or whether the original intention of the created thing was good, pure, or even salvific. Those things in our lives that represent God’s saving action in human history can all too often replace God instead.”ⁱ

The commentator goes on to say:

“From this vantage point, [this passage] challenges us to consider what our idols are. As I write this in late 2020, have we elevated in-person worship to an idol, like the bronze serpent that saved the Hebrews if they would but look at it? What about a conservative Supreme Court majority? What about the other things that started life as an expression of faithfulness but became the be-all and end-all of that faith? A stance on abortion or a woman’s right to choose? Or gay marriage? Or school integration? Or Black Lives Matter? Or the Second Amendment? Or anything else?”ⁱⁱ

When we espouse something because – at the time – it is what we believe is part of how God wants us to live – we have to be careful that it does not become more important than Godself! That thought will give me something to chew on for a while.

But let’s go back for a minute to the whole idea of looking at the serpent to begin with – that notion that in order to be healed, in order to connect again with the way of God, the *will* of God for us, we need to look at what’s killing us.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus brings up this image of the serpent as he is talking with Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to him one night to talk. Jesus draws a parallel between the serpent being lifted up – and the Son of Man being lifted up – on the cross. Both of these images are ones of God’s saving help. But both the serpent and the cross are also images of death.

One pastor had this to say:

“At first this seems confusing. After all, the serpent is the very image of the thing that was killing the Israelites. And the cross is, in reality, a weapon of torture and death. But perhaps that is the point. For just as the snake on the staff showed the Israelites what was killing them, the cross shows humans the thing that is killing us. And it isn’t Jesus. It is ourselves. It is what we, in our sin, would do to another human—what we, in our sin, would even do to God with us. These stories—the stories of Moses’ serpent on a stick and even the story of the cross— remind us of how far we have gotten off track.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And so – what we have before us today is the opportunity – the invitation – to look at our sin – to look at the choices we make that take us away from the ways of God, the things and words and actions and *inactions* that divide and separate us from God and from one another.

The way of God, the values of God lived out by Jesus, are not easy. They were counter-cultural in the time of Jesus, and they are today. But *not* living the way of Love will kill us. Yes, the serpent will come back to bite us.

This is all laid out in the letter to the Ephesians, where we heard:

“You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.”

- Not disobedient as in breaking laws, but as in not obeying, not hearing and following the way of Love. And the letter goes on:

“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ..” “For we are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

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We were *made* for *God's* way of life – for the way of Love. And when we don't live that, we are separating ourselves from God, and from each other, but also *from ourselves*. And it is only by facing the ways we are killing ourselves that we can be healed.

Jesus said, “the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.”

Sometimes, even when we know that the heart of God is justice and mercy and love, we choose to live out of other values. We choose our own interests instead of those of others. We choose payback instead of paying forward. We make idols out of the ways we have always done things, separating ourselves from people who do things differently. The pandemic has taught many of us that the church building itself that has been a means of God's grace for us can too easily become an idol that we long to get back to – forgetting that God is dwelling in our midst with or without the building. We adopt a righteous cause, initially out of a desire to live out of love, but end up vilifying others, thereby stepping *away* from that way of Love.

We can't say, perhaps, why we or others choose to love darkness rather than light. But we can acknowledge that it is a choice. And if we have been choosing to live in darkness, then we can change, and we can choose to live in the light.

The Scriptures for today draw us into the light – to look directly at instruments of death – the serpent and the cross – and acknowledge what walking away from the way of God does in our lives. But those same Scriptures also reveal this truth: That God “can take even the most lethal and deadly parts of our world—the most sinful and selfish parts of ourselves—and find ways to redeem them and remake them into instruments of healing and hope.” For God so loved the world...
Amen.

- [Numbers 21:4-9 Ephesians 2:1-10 John 3:14-21 Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22](#)

ⁱ Henry T. C. Sun, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-numbers-214-9-5>

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Kristin Adkins Whiteside, <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/sermons/b16-the-fourth-sunday-in-lent-year-b-2021/>