

## “Look and Live”

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

And so now we come to this rather strange story from the book of Numbers about the poisonous serpents. We went to the Rochester Flower show two weeks ago, and in many of the displays we noticed that there were snakes – not real ones, of course, but representations of snakes. In one there was a tree that had been guided over the years of its growth to take on a serpentine shape. We wondered if maybe it was because St. Patrick’s Day was coming up, and because of the mythology that he had banished snakes from Ireland.

What is strange about the snakes that show up in the story from the book of Numbers is that it is God who sends them. It is punishment for the fact that the people have begun whining and complaining about the food. They are tired of eating manna every day for breakfast, lunch and dinner, like left-over turkey after Thanksgiving. They have manna coming out their ears. Chopped manna, sautéed, crumbled, creamed, sliced, diced, fried, baked, flaked, raw, manna helper, manna supreme, manna-cotti (sorry!). Forty years of manna! It would be enough to drive anyone to kvetching (if not retching). Centuries later the rabbis waxed rhapsodic about manna, saying that it tasted like whatever your mouth watered for, that it was a magical food. But none of those rabbis actually had to eat it. So the people begin to grumble. “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.”

This was by now the second generation of Israelites wandering in the wilderness toward what they were told was a land of milk and honey, the Promised Land. Some of these people had been born in the wilderness and had been eating manna all their lives. They had no memory of anything else. The older folks related to them what it was like back in Egypt. But their stories may have been told with the filter of selective memory, the past taking on a romanticized glow. The part that they remembered was the food and the water. Slavery didn’t seem so bad in their memories. They forgot the overseers, the brick quotas, the long days under the hot sun, forced labor, lack of freedom. All they remembered was that the food tasted better, they had all of it that they could eat and a never-ending supply of water. Here they had neither the fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic they had in Egypt, nor the milk and honey and other wonders promised to them for some time in the future. They were stuck here in the wilderness eating manna.

But perhaps it was more than just the steady diet of manna. According to one source it was a kind of “bone-weariness” that overtook the people. They had been living in the wilderness for so long that the wilderness had worked its way into their psyches. The Promised Land had become a dream that they thought would never be realized. “According to the Hebrew, the people were more than impatient—they were short of breath, running out of the stamina necessary to their wilderness wanderings, utterly discouraged.”<sup>1</sup>

Some of us here may know something about bone-weariness, about growing impatient and getting short of breath, losing resolve and running out of stamina, being utterly discouraged. We are all living in a kind of economic wilderness currently, as I’m sure I don’t have to tell anyone here. Things are looking pretty stark and barren. People are discouraged. Some find themselves in very precarious positions. People are losing jobs, businesses, homes, savings, retirement income. I talked with someone just the other night who wanted to refinance his home, but when he checked, homes in the neighborhood had been selling so low that he didn’t have enough equity.

And there are other kinds of wildernesses, other kinds of bone-weariness. It might be a persistent family problem, the loss of a loved one, a chronic health issue, something job related. “...the people became impatient,” the text says. Bone weary, discouraged, short of breath, losing their stamina.

So they kvetched, groused, complained. And, according to the storyteller, God's response to this was to send poisonous snakes among them resulting in many of them dying of snake bites. The people came to Moses and confessed that they had sinned. They had seen the error of their ways. They would eat the manna gratefully, without complaining. If only God would take away the serpents. So Moses prayed. But instead of removing the serpents, God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and to put it on a pole, and God told him that if anyone had been bitten merely looked at the brass serpent, that person would live.

A very strange tale. And frankly it creates some serious theological problems. First of all it seems rather harsh, doesn't it, that for a little kvetching God would send poisonous snakes to bite the people. Especially when at other times when they complained, God simply took care of the problem, providing water and manna in the first place.

Another problem is that the bronze serpent is God's idea! God, who had given the Ten Commandments to Moses, the very first of which was that they were not to make any idols, any graven images in the form of anything in heaven or on earth. It smacks of paganism and magic.

But the biggest theological problem for me is that the story seems to teach that when something bad happens to us, it is because we have done something wrong. I have a serious problem with that kind of thinking. First of all, as far as I can tell, that is not the way the world works. Sometimes those who do wrong get their due, but just as often, it seems, they get rewarded. And I don't think there is any need for me to supply contemporary examples. I will let everyone provide their own from the depressing news of these last weeks.

People already have a natural tendency when something goes wrong to ask, "why is God punishing me?" Maybe it is stories like this in the Bible, taken literally, that encourage that kind of thinking. When calamity strikes, when things go awry in our lives, when someone gets ill or someone has an accident, are we to believe that this has happened because of their behavior, that it is a form of divine punishment? When a tornado rips up the houses on one side of the street and not the other, does it mean that God had it in for those living in the even numbered houses? When one plane in trouble is set down in the Hudson River with no loss of life, and another plane near Buffalo crashes and all on board are killed, are we to read something theological into that, were the people on board one plane more deserving than those on the other plane? That just doesn't make any sense to me.

As I look around at the world that you and I live in, I just can't find any justification for this idea of divine punishment for wrongdoing. If that were how the world worked, if the righteous always prospered and the evil always got their due, if the world really worked like that, it would be perfectly obvious who the people are who need to straighten out their lives. But of course, it is not. But in the annals of Hebrew storytelling, the interpretation was that the snakes were sent by God as punishment for their complaining.

However this story came to us, and whatever it may have meant to those who wrote it down, I think we have to find our own meaning. The writer of the Fourth Gospel found meaning in the story as an analogy for Jesus on the cross. "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." We who have been poisoned by sin and its consequences of spiritual death can look to Jesus on the cross to be healed.

What meaning do we find in the story? As I read the Bible, what I look for are the timeless principles. The principles still apply, even if the world view in which they are couched may be outdated. I wonder if it isn't possible to appreciate the lesson of the story without necessarily accepting the premise of divine punishment?

The lesson, it seems to me, is pretty clear, that our complaining doesn't really get us anywhere, that it is counterproductive to live in either the idealized past or the hoped for future. Sometimes I suspect our complaining doesn't really have that much to do with whatever it is we are complaining about, but rather comes from somewhere inside, a general sort of malaise or discontent with life, or with how the cards have been dealt us. In other words, it isn't necessarily always rational, as we can see in the complaint of the people: "There is no food...and we detest this miserable food." Dr. Pauline Wallin says that "complaining drains you of energy and creates a negative attitude that affects you and everyone around you."<sup>2</sup>

Part of the cure must surely be to live in the present and to keep things in perspective. "This is the day that the Lord has made," says the Psalmist, "let us be glad and rejoice in it." Let us live in it, work and play in it, and even if we sometimes fall into complaining about it, let us remember that it is the only day we've got for now.

And we are also pretty good at selective memory – like the Israelites. The further away they got from Egypt, the rosier were their memories of that experience. They forgot the burdens but remembered the benefits. They forgot the lashes but remembered the leeks.

I know how this works because every year around this time of year I am so very anxious for warm weather, to put the snow and ice and cold behind me. But then when warm weather comes, so do the bugs – the black flies, the mosquitoes, the spiders, gnats, flies. In the dead of winter when I think about spring and summer I never remember that part of it. We tend to remember the past with rose colored glasses. We remember gas being .25 cents a gallon, but forget that the wages were \$1.50 and hour.

Aside from the theological considerations, I am wondering if there is not some psychological understanding in the story. What is most interesting is that the people were told that in order to be healed of the bite of the serpent, they were required to look at a representation of the serpent. They were told to look at and focus on the very thing that caused them pain and threatened to cause their death.

How odd that is, and yet how true it is. We were discussing this the other night at Soup and Study. When we have suffered a loss, our tendency is to try not to think about it, to distract ourselves and to try to move on. But oddly enough, healing comes from just the opposite of that, by looking straight at our loss, rehearsing it over and over again to our friends and family, telling our story, dissecting it and reliving it and feeling the pain over and over again. The healing comes from looking at the very thing that caused us the pain in the first place.

Maybe that is the lesson of the bronze serpent. Look at whatever it is in your life that has caused you pain, look it full in the face, and be healed.

<sup>1</sup> *The Attacking Serpents*, James Arne Nestingen, The Lenten First Lessons, *Word & World Texts in Context*, Luther Seminary, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> [www.innerbrat.com](http://www.innerbrat.com)