

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; John 3:14-21; Ephesians 2:1-10

Numbers 21:4-9 is the story of God's provision of a way of salvation for his embittered, complaining people. Israel "became impatient" with God because of their continued sojourn in the wilderness, and "spoke against God and against Moses" (vss. 4-5). They even detested the manna God miraculously provided for them each day. Thus, the author of Numbers states, "the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people so that many Israelites died" (vs. 6).

The people cried to Moses, Moses cried to God, and God prepared a way of escape for the people. "The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a serpent of bronze and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live'" (vs. 8). So Moses did as he was commanded to do by God, and the people lived, both chastened for their critical nature but also delivered by the merciful action of God.

This story is difficult to understand if we do not understand that the ancient world looked upon snakes differently than we do. Modern humanity views snakes as dangerous and death dealing, almost an incarnation of evil. Although ancient humanity recognized the deadly and dangerous nature of serpents, they also saw the snake as a metaphor for fertility, life and healing. Thus, in this story, the "poisonous serpent" is perceived as dangerous and dark, dealing death in its strike. But looking to the bronze snake placed upon the pole brought life and healing to the people. As the author of Genesis put it in the creation story, "Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made" (Gen. 3:1). So, in Numbers, this snake is also "crafty", in that it can both kill and heal! What gives life also brings death!

This story plays a prominent role in the scriptures in that it is a theme to which biblical writers often return (Num. 21:4-9; II Kings 18:4; John 3:14). The reason why is that it reflects an essential Hebrew perspective about the origins and nature of salvation. The affliction to which Israel is subjected is an affliction they have brought upon themselves (they complained and grumbled against God and in punishment received a plague of poisonous snakes). But in the midst of their affliction, the Israelites had no other means of rescue than to fix their eyes on the bronze snake – the very likeness of the serpents besieging them – and thus be given life! Their sin brings judgment upon them. But God, in God's mercy, acts to deliver them. And that deliverance requires their participation in it, in that they must gaze upon the bronze serpent. Thus, this story is an early story that helps shape Israel's understanding of salvation and liberation being due to God's intervention for them. And this insight will play a major role in the shaping of the story about the conversation between Jesus of Nazareth and a Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus.

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 demonstrates the chesedh love of God toward those who love him, particularly when they are in trouble. It begins:

“O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good for his steadfast love (*chesedh*) endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and south” (107:1-3).

The Psalmist then demonstrates this steadfast and gracious love of God for his people by giving four examples. He does so by holding each of the four groups to the same poetic structure, copying two refrains identically, but also developing new content for each group. The four groups are desert wanderers, people experiencing great pain and darkness (either spiritually or emotionally), the physically ill, and those on the abyss of the ocean.

The form followed in each segment is identical. It begins with the word “some” and then a naming of the problem area (“Some wandered in desert wastes”, “Some went down to the sea in ships”, *etc.*). The problem that each group faces is then briefly analyzed. Then the segment changes its focus with an introduction of identical words – “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress”, followed by a more full explanation of that deliverance. Finally, the segment resolves itself by concluding “Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works for humankind”.

So the order of all four segments is: (1) a problem overwhelming the people of Israel is stated; (2) They recognize their inability to cope with this problem by themselves, and so turn to God in their distress; (3) God hears them and rescues them from their distress.

The selection from this Psalm for today, vss. 17-22 sounds like the author had this Sunday’s Old Testament lesson in mind. The Israelites in the desert “loathed any kind of food”, “drew close to death”, “cried out to God” and were delivered. The refrain thus concludes, “Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices, and tell of his deeds with songs of joy” (vss. 21-22).

John 3:14-21 is among the best-known stories in scripture, and indisputably its sixteenth verse is the best known of all scripture. It is also the most misinterpreted scripture.

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17).

The story that reaches its apex in John 3:16 begins with the text telling us, “Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night” (John 3:1-2). This passage tells us three things about Nicodemus. First, he belonged to the Pharisee movement of Israel – one of the nation’s principle power groups Jesus opposed. Second, he was a “leader of the Jews” – in other words, he was a member of the Sanhedrin and therefore a part of the ruling elite in Israel. Third, he came to Jesus “by night”. Normally, we think of Nicodemus as being an honest seeker after truth, but the text doesn’t imply that. In fact, the text implies the opposite, noting in particular that he came “by night”. Nicodemus came under cover of darkness, hoping not to be recognized.

This “leader” never gets to tell Jesus the purpose for his visit. Instead, he opens with words of flattery, which was an appropriate way of beginning a conversation with a teacher at that time. Jesus interrupts and cuts to the chase with the words, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again” (John 3:3). The words the author has Jesus use for “born again” are intriguing. They can correctly be translated either “born from above” or “born again”; either translation is equally correct. The church has filled that word with all kinds of theological content (“Brother, are you born again?” “He’s a born-again Christian.”). But consider to whom Jesus is speaking, and what he is demanding of him.

Nicodemus is highly positioned in the political and economic establishment. He is a part of “the world” that John has previously described as “darkness”. He is a part of the dominating hierarchy of Israel that has made itself powerful at the expense of the peasants. Now Jesus is telling him, “You cannot experience the kingdom of God – the shalom community – unless you are born again, born from above”.

In other words, Jesus is saying to him, “Nicodemus, if you really want to embrace the kingdom of God for yourself, then you have to start all over again. You have to be willing to die to your dominating way of life, and be ‘born again’ – as if you were a fresh, new baby – living the kingdom life. And that can’t happen except that you are ‘born from above’; you must allow God to work in your soul and life to liberate you from your commitment to all that makes you powerful and be willing to join this relational community of my disciples. And you can’t do that, Nicodemus, by coming ‘at night.’ You can’t do it and escape notice. You can only do it by openly embracing a personal and public life of a politics of justice, an economics of equitable sharing of wealth, and ‘to walk humbly with your God’ as a member of my community. You must be born again, Nicodemus.”

Then either Jesus or the narrator moves on to a commentary on Jesus’ challenge to Nicodemus. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). This is a summary of Jesus’ gospel. God loves “the world,” “the cosmos,” the “created order,” the “social structures,” “humankind” so much that he gave his Son so that humanity might come to redemption. God’s love, manifested in Jesus, is so powerful that it brings everyone and everything into the circle of his love (even the Roman Empire).

The basis for judgment is not God’s act but each person’s and each system’s decision. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the [cosmos] to condemn the [cosmos], but in order that the [cosmos] might be saved through him” (John 3:17).

But if it is not God that condemns us, then what causes the cosmos – the universe, the earth, the systems of the world, humankind, individuals – to be lost? Jesus or the narrator continues. “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the [cosmos], and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

The judgment is that people like Nicodemus (or you or me) choose to join with the political system, their businesses and industry, their religion and value systems in the practice of domination, oppression and exploitation. It is their actions that lead to rejection. Their deeds

betray them, for those deeds reveal whether one's heart belongs to the "light" or to the "darkness". It's up to you, Nicodemus? Whom will you choose?

Here we see in John 3:16-17 a magnificent blending of the personal and the corporate, the individual and the systems. John is proclaiming that Jesus has come to set free the entire cosmos from "darkness" (i.e., domination, oppression and exploitation). Whether individuals, the systems and structures or humankind as a totality ever experience being set free depends entirely upon us – and whether we embrace the new world Jesus is bringing to us in all its capacity to transform human existence.¹

Integral to Jesus' explanation to Nicodemus of the need for being "born again" is the Master's use of an important Jewish symbol. He said to the Pharisee, "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" (Jn. 3:14-15). Jesus uses that ancient metaphor from Hebrew literature, knowing that Nicodemus would immediately recall that story from Numbers 21. But what Jesus does with this story is amazing!

A primary emphasis throughout the Gospel of John was that the Gospel of Jesus was superceding the Law of Moses. It was not that the Law was evil; rather, it was the means God used to bring humanity into relationship with him and to work together on creating the shalom community ("kingdom of God") for humanity. But because those who interpreted and taught and administered the Law used it to secure their own power, prestige, possessions and privilege at the expense of the peasants, they had corrupted the Law beyond redemption. John called these corrupters of the Law the "Judeans"² – the religious aristocracy of Israel, which was also the nation's political and economic aristocracy as well. It is that emphasis which John subtly develops through Jesus' reference to the serpent in the wilderness.

John places into the Greek of 3:14 an intriguing wordplay, playing on an earlier wordplay that appears in the Hebrew of Numbers 21:9. When John has Jesus say, "just as Moses lifted up the serpent . . . so must the Son of Man be lifted up", the Greek word John uses for "lift up" is the same Greek word for "exalt". Moses "lifted up" the bronze serpent so that the Israelites would not die of poisonous snakebites. But God "exalted" Jesus on the cross that brought healing and salvation to the world. Pilate and the "Judeans" (the Jewish aristocracy) sought to eliminate Jesus through crucifixion as an enemy of the state. Instead, what they did was to "exalt" Jesus. The cross became his throne. What the Judeans saw as Jesus' moment of greatest defeat was, in reality, Jesus' triumph over sin (even the sin of Pilate and the Judeans) so that "whoever believes in him may have eternal³ life" (Jn. 3:15). And that brings us to the second wordplay.

In the Hebrew text of Numbers 21:9, the term "serpent of bronze" is *nekhesh nekhusht*, another play on words. It means "serpent of bronze", that is, the serpent who heals the one who has been

¹ Linthicum, Robert C., *Building A People of Power: Equipping Churches to Transform Their Communities* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media and World Vision Press, 2006), pp. 72-74.

² See the commentary on John 2:13-22 that was part of the commentary by Partners in Urban Transformation on last Sunday's Gospel Lesson for a full exploration of the "Judeans" in John.

³ "Eternal" life in the Gospel of John not only means an ongoing future of the believer with God, but a fulfilled, enriched, meaning-filled, fulfilling life both now and forever in the unending presence of God!

bitten. The *nekhesh nekhoshet* was made by Moses at the command of God in order to provide a way of salvation to repentant Israelites who would otherwise be facing a certain death.

Intriguingly, however, I Kings 18:4 tells us of the *Nekhushtan*, a bronze serpent that stood in the Jerusalem Temple during the reign of Hezekiah and was alleged to have been the actual sculpture struck by Moses. King Hezekiah had it destroyed because it had become an idol to the Jews – a pole that had once brought salvation in its wake, but now was being worshipped by the Jews and thus diverting them from obedience to Yahweh.

Thus, Jesus is saying to Nicodemus and John is saying to his readers, “Don’t expect the Law of Moses to save you.” Just as the *Nekhushtan* was used by the religious leaders of Hezekiah’s Temple to lead Israel to turn the *nekhesh nekhoshet* into an idol, so Israel’s religious, political and economic leaders will lead you astray if you place your trust in them. The only savior upon whom you can truly depend is neither a bronze serpent nor a Temple but “the Son of Man who has been *lifted up* on a cross and will thus be *exalted* as the redeemer of the world.” “If Moses’ “lifting up” of the serpent gave “life” (Num. 21:9), the “raising up” of Jesus will give “eternal life”.⁴

Ephesians 2:1-10. The Apostle Paul uses the same metaphor when he writes, “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 – by grace you have been saved – and *raised us up* with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (2:4-6).

What Paul is contending here is that what God has done through Christ in lifting him up in crucifixion so that such an execution is turned into exaltation, so God does the same in us who are chosen and called by God. Jesus’ death and resurrection are historical events that happened to Jesus of Nazareth, Paul contends. But they also apply to us as believers. There is a profound union between Christ and those who trust in him, so that we who follow him must die and rise again. Just like Nicodemus, we must be “born again” by being “born from above”. We must die to the “Laws” of the world and the systems that maintain them. In receiving Christ as our Lord, we must give up the lordship of the world that prizes power, possessions, prestige and position, and instead embrace relationship with God and humanity, justice and the fair distribution of wealth. But such “dying” to such values and standards brings about a rebirth into the new – the world as God intends it to be, the embrace of the shalom community. We have a new mind, a new identity in Christ, and a new ability to live liberated from the standards of the “Judeans”.

But how do we do that? Twice in this passage, Paul states, “by grace you have been saved through faith” (2:5, 2:8). We can’t, in our own strength, embrace God’s intentions for the world and begin living a life of justice, mercy and humility before God. Only by trusting in (or having faith in) a work already done for us by Jesus can we embrace the new life with Jesus.

You and I can’t build God’s shalom community. Only God can do that through Christ. Rather, we become the means Christ can use to change the world. As the Jerusalem Bible so

⁴ Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God: John’s Gospel and Radical Discipleship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1994), p. 91.

magnificently translates Ephesians 2:10, “We are God’s work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it.”

Thus God, at work in us through Christ, shapes us into the people he has called and chosen us to be, and the works we do reflect God’s artistry within and through us as we impact the world around us for Christ and His Kingdom.

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