

The Serpent and the Savior

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

March 14, 2021

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hands up if you have had your vaccination shot? I love the way that the vaccination centers are like hamburger restaurants. You can get a hamburger from McDonalds, or from Wendy's, or from Five Guys. Likewise, you can get a vaccine from Walgreens, Giant or Sam's Cub. I know some of you have gone to your local doctors. Someone told me she had registered at seven different places.

This Covid vaccine - apparently it's different to all the vaccines we've had in the past. It contains "instructions" for how to make copies of the spike protein. It causes your body to make antibodies and then, when it comes into contact with the virus, those antibodies go into overdrive. But don't quote me on that.

Most of us had vaccines in the past which were based on the old fashioned principle that the vaccine is a small amount of the disease itself - not too much, just enough to help your own immune system build up resistance to the disease itself. When I was younger my family did a lot of overseas travel, and I remember having to get vaccinated before traveling abroad. I remember when we lived in Australia we had to get a vaccine in order to visit a particularly exotic location: the United States.

Vaccination has been known about for a long time, because homeopathic doctors in Egypt during the reign of the Pharaohs had developed medicines and techniques for dealing with illness and poison. Knowing this helps to explain why God had a particular cure for those Israelites in the desert suffering from snakebite. We heard about it in this morning's reading from the book of Numbers. God says to Moses,

"Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live."

Moses did as God commanded, and made a serpent of bronze, or copper, and put it on a pole; "and whenever the serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live." So what does this story tell us? Let's go back in time, to the Exodus, when God led Moses and the Israelites out of the land of Egypt and into the wilderness.

This was the journey from slavery to freedom and its destination was the Promised Land. The only thing was, it was taking longer than expected. Some of the Israelites were losing patience, first with Moses and then with God. They began to complain bitterly against God and Moses, saying,

"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?"

God doesn't respond very sympathetically to their complaining. Instead of upgrading their diet, he sends poisonous serpents among them; the snakes bite people, who then die.

Seriously? Thanks God! That really helps us! Why on earth would God send snakes to bite people?

This is where we have to open our minds a little. Sometimes reading the Bible is like reading a detective story - you have to look at motivations and check for clues. The clue in this story is the serpent - where have we seen him before? In the Garden of Eden, where he persuaded Adam and Eve to disobey God and eat of the forbidden fruit. We call this sin, and all our readings this morning have sin as their theme. The disobedience in the garden of Eden is the first sin and its consequences have been with us ever since. Now, if the cause of sin is disobedience, the root of disobedience is pride - of putting oneself above everyone else, including God.

That's what the Israelites did in the desert. They had begun to initiate a rift between themselves and God, and the fiery snakes sent to torment them were a punishment for their pushing back at God. But then the story takes another turn. After Moses intercedes for the people, God takes pity on them and sends them the remedy for their sin: the bronze serpent on the pole. Gaze at it, all you who are bitten, and you will live.

Let's do some detective work. Now, if we translate the serpent as a symbol for sin, then we can deduce that only by looking at our own sin can we avoid death ourselves. That, I think, is the lesson we are meant to take from this story. This is not primarily a story about an angry God; it is mainly a story about sinful "us". When we read the Bible, there are meanings beyond the literal, and this is one of them.

As I said before, all our readings today are about sin. How it starts and how it ends. But these readings are also about God's mercy. In our gospel reading, we find Jesus making reference to the Old Testament story. 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."

Here, the whole of God's plan and purpose for humanity is revealed. For now, instead of the serpent on the pole, it will be Jesus who is lifted up. I mean, he will be lifted up on the cross and put to death. The one who is without sin will carry with him, to the cross, the sins of the whole world. Life that was lost through the disobedience of Adam is regained through the obedience of Christ.

What we learn is that our true remedy is now one very familiar to us - it is the Son of God crucified on the cross! We gaze no longer at a serpent, but a Savior. The symbol of sin is still there - the cross - but now God has claimed it as *his* place, and taken the sin from it.

Now, this has major implications for us, who were once condemned to death for our sins, but are now redeemed through the love of Christ. We don't deserve it, we haven't earned it, but by God we can be saved by it. Jesus has won for us new life by the cross. God has done something for us we couldn't do for ourselves. This is the revolutionary expression of God's love for us.

One final thought. As we turn to God with grateful hearts, we remember that sin remains a daily fact of life. People are still doing evil deeds. Our sins are like snakebites - if untreated they can fester and infect the whole body. Unless we see them and acknowledge them, they will bring about in us a spiritual death. For *your* sins, it may be enough for you to make the weekly confession. However, you may wish to shine a stronger light on them, in which case you should make a private confession with a priest. This is what the Church calls the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which you can do as a preparation for Easter.

We are like the centurion in the gospel of Luke, who says, "Lord...I am not worthy to have you come under my roof...but only speak the word, and let my servant be healed." (Luke 7:6-7). We confess our sins to God and throw ourselves on God's mercy. We say, "Lord, have mercy" because we are dying under the weight of our sin and only God can lift that weight from us.

But for now, lift your eyes toward the cross. See there, God lifted high, over all creation, his mercy unending, his brightness undimmed. Lift your eyes to see, with the light of your heart, what God has done for us. He has saved us from the death of sin, and shown us the way to new life in Christ.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Father David Beresford