

A Sermon for DaySpring

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“Why Must He?”

Numbers 21: 4-9; Ephesians 2: 1-10; John 3: 14-21

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Becoming a Christian was a long and painful process for Saint Augustine. A teary-eyed evangelistic appeal and several verses of “Just as I Am,” wouldn’t have come close to getting him “down the aisle.”

Even “**every head bowed and every eye closed, while the choir sings you come,**” would have been ineffective with this agonizing soul. I mean, he’d have been a revival preacher’s nightmare... They’d for sure have pulled out that ole’ desperate stand-by, “**You might not make it home tonight.**” His soul was a tough nut to crack.

He thought...

He read...

He debated...

He was classically educated... knew all a well-to-do would know... brilliant but so stubborn... and arrogant. Once he was complaining to Ambrose who was becoming his teacher about scripture and about what bad literature it was and Ambrose said to him...

“You silly little pedant, you have not the skills for reading the Bible. When you read, you erroneously think that a fish is a fish, a loaf of bread is but a loaf of bread and nothing else. No, in the Bible everyday things are transformed, becoming signs for deeper, richer meaning.” (Clement, The Roots of Christina Mysticism)

Ambrose offers us a good word about the way we come to scripture... We do engage it at every place in the journey and every stage of spiritual growth... but “getting it” takes faith... “getting it” takes maturity. We need to be careful. You and your Bible in your lap in your living room by yourself, will never be enough. It takes time and growth to understand how to deal with scripture.

In our gospel reading, Jesus gives us an example of just that. No doubt, because he was immersed in scripture, when he spoke... images and stories and lines from the Old Testament just coursed through his mind and on this day, one coursed right out into his teaching.

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert...” He grabs a picture... he takes an Old Testament story and makes good use of it.

It’s a weird story... really. The Israelites were out in the desert wandering... but it’s intentional wandering. It’s guided. They’re going somewhere even though it feels to them like they’re going in circles.

And remember, these folks were the ones who’d had the chance to move on into the Promised Land. God had offered them a transfer and they said, **“No, thanks... have you seen the size of those folks living over there.”**

They weren’t ready to risk... to trust... I guess you have to get sick enough of the wilderness, so God said, **“Have it your way”** and they wandered.

They went to Meribah...

And to Edom...

And they set out for Kedesh...

And then to Atharim

Then they went to Mount Hor and back around to Edom...

And finally the writer has this great line. **“But the people grew weary... on the way.”** I love the translation that says, **“The people grew weary on account of the journey.”**

That’s as predictable a thing as I know... Right... people always get “weary on account of the journey.” The journey is just hard...

Not knowing what’s next.

Having to tear down camp...

Pull up all those stakes you had every thing tied down with...

Having to set up again in some new, unfamiliar place.

The journey's hard and we do get weary.

A friend asked me recently... **“Why does God make this whole deal so hard. Seems like it ought not be that way and if I were God I'd make it easier.”**

Of course, part of the answer is we make it hard... but the truth is, God seems to make it hard too. Some how... for some reason... getting to the Promised Land and the truth of it and life of it... requires a journey.

It may feel like wandering to us but the wandering has it's purpose, so it's not really wandering. And the problem comes, when we don't know that... When we start to believe that it's just wandering and there's no point... no destination or purpose.

And we slide into despair... which, by the way, is the opposite of faith... not doubt. Despair... there is no point.

That's when we get in trouble. That's when they got in trouble.

God has the whole family in one huge station wagon and the back seat is getting annoying.

“Are we there yet?”

“Why'd you bring us out here in this terrible place?”

“I'm sick of this manna... manna, manna, manna... Can't we stop at Dairy Queen just once... or go back to Egypt?”

Whine, whine, whine... they were weary on account of the journey and they were whining and so... God pulled the car over. He'd finally had enough.

And God sent snakes... poisonous snakes. And you thought the back of your dad's hand was bad.

Snakes... I hate snakes. I grew up in the Piney Woods of East Texas and we were always watching for... avoiding... stepping over... killing... snakes. I just hate them.

When Brandt was little, he was into animals and loved to go to the pet store. Somehow he got interested in snakes and wanted one for a pet and he was saving his money. We were, of course, discouraging this purchase.

Once, when we were in the store, the manager came up and was like,

“They make such great pets...

You don't have to feed them often...

House train them...

Or worry when you go out of town.”

Brandt was listening and smiling and I'm behind him saying, **“Tcksnay on the akesnay.”**

... Just hate snakes.

And you know the Israelites did... There were snakes everywhere... In the tent... Under the bedroll... in the outhouse... people were being bit and dying.

It was awful and so they repented. (Smart folks... that they were.) And went to Moses and said, **“Tell God we're sorry and that we'll never complain in the back of the station wagon again... Ask him to take these dang snakes away.”**

An outbreak of rattlesnakes will lead to repentance every time.

So Moses goes to God and prays for the people, **“God, I know they don't deserve it but...”** He prays to God but God doesn't take the snakes away. I would've... were I God. I would remove the source of the pain... or what seems like the source of the pain to me... anyway.

Just pull out my divine wand and say “snakes away” and then we could get on with the journey and all the people would like me again. If I were God, people liking me would be the point.

Not so with the God of scripture and that's not what God does. He tells Moses to make a snake and put it on a pole and if they get bit they can look up at the pole and be okay. So... God gives them the antidote.

Apparently, God can't or God won't remove the consequences of our sin... Apparently, God's mode is to deliver us from our sin. Grace does not erase what is true... it deals with it redemptively.

Because the point... the purpose of the journey is to be in a trusting and true relationship to God. **"You're my people... I'm you're God"** ... remember... that's the point. That is the journey.

It isn't to rid us of pain... So... God does what is loving and heals to love.

The snakes stay but there is a way beyond the poison they bring. **"Um, Folks, you have to look at this snake, folks."** Moses announced a little sheepishly, I'll bet.

"He said, that? God... wants us to look at that stupid looking snake you made up on that pole? He really said that?"

"Unh, hunh, He did."

"God wants us to look up and see the very thing that is giving us trouble... the thing that is killing us?"

"Right, that's what God said."

I suspect they had their questions... but when you're snake bit in the desert, there's nothing left to do but trust... and they did. And they were healed.

It was their trust... their obedience. It was knowing they needed God's deliverance. It was their looking and in their looking, seeing and being reminded that they'd been snake bit and that the snakes arrived in camp because of their unfaithfulness. It was all of that... that brought about their healing.

Their pain... and repentance.

Their trust... and obedience

God's grace... and God's power.

I'm sure that through the centuries... folks... immature folks, got this all wrong and misread this story. They weren't careful with it! In loud voices they would proclaim, **"The scriptures say if we want to be healed of any pain we need to stare at a snake on a stick."** Probably lots of snakes on sticks in homes warding off bad things, don't you think?

The snake on the stick didn't heal them... all the truth and reality behind it did.

Jesus knew how to interpret scripture and how to use it and so he said to them, **"Just like Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up... I must be lifted up."**

Why? Why must he? Be careful.

Because we're snake bit and we're dying?

and there's such pain in it?

and because there is a point to our existence...

a relationship to God...

that is the end of it all?

Jesus says, **"This must happen... I must be lifted up."** And we all know what he means by that. He uses it again later... "lifted up" and John looks at the reader and says, **"He was talking about how he was to die."**

Why? Why must he be lifted up?

And careful before you blurt out the answer. Richard Rohr says, **The thinking mind** (our limited, small, material minds) **cannot get to this... we try... we get our theories... we try to name it but it always falls short and often it obscures the very power of it.** (Everything Belongs, p 151) This is truth only completely known at a deeper level. So be careful as you answer my question why?

"Why? Well, we know why...because someone has to die... someone has to be up on the stick and then when that happens every thing's okay."

Does that sound familiar?

It's all about the wood and the whip and the blood...

and the pain and the punishment.

“Sure... we know why... The cross is the price Jesus has to pay so God will have to let us in... now he has to.”

Careful... be careful... this is not divine, judicial, juju. We cannot sum this up and if we do, we'll be like the ancient Israelites putting paper Mache snakes in their homes to make them feel better.

This is not Jesus on a pole. “No (Ambrose said) in the Bible everyday things (like death) are transformed becoming signs for deeper, richer meaning.”

“The Son of Man must be lifted up.”

Why? Because that is where love leads?

Because everything must be assumed to be healed... all of it?

Because you and I must see the reality of Sin...
and our sins?

Because we have to be taught to admit to our own darkness... to see it. Because this is the path that leads to life?

Why? Because the cross and resurrection name and reveal the whole pattern. Because this is the only language large enough to say what must be said?

Because the world must be lifted up? This is **“the fate of God for the life of the world”** (R. Rohr, 155, E.B.) He must be lifted up so that we can be lifted up.

That's what he says, **“So that everyone who believes may have eternal life.”** And do watch your thinking mind. Careful...Some of you... maybe most of you... just translated that, **“everyone who gets the right doctrine into his or her gray matter, gets a ticket to heaven.”**

Is that all? God dies? Jesus is lifted up, and if you'll think the right things about it. You get a pass...a “get out of hell free” card?

Or is it... about your seeing... and your trusting in God because you're dying and you want to be alive again? And is it about God in Christ assuming everything and lifting all of creation into Eternity? Is it about drawing all humanity unto himself, as he said? “If I am lifted up.”

Listen to Gregory of Nazianzen writing in the 4th Century. **“Why was the blood shed for us... why was it poured out, and to whom was it offered? Is it not evident that the Father accepts the sacrifice, not because he demanded it or feels some need for it, but in order to carry out his own plan. Humanity had to be brought to life by the humanity of God.”**

Doesn't quite work on a gospel tract, huh?

Nor does this... what we heard from Paul earlier, **“We were dead in our transgressions (snake bit)... and God... because of His great love and in His rich mercy, raised us up with Christ and placed us in the heavenly realms, in an eternal place (now... it's happened... you're in touch with it), now in the heavenly realm so that He might show us the incomparable riches of His grace.”** (All that there is for you to know).

Jesus **“must be”**... lifted up... in death, in resurrection, in glory.

That we might be also.

“We are God's handiwork, created in Jesus Christ...” to do and to be all God made us to do and to be. And snake bit, though we are... and weary though we get... God is lifting us up through Christ. If we'll look...and see and trust... Christ will draw us all unto God.

Amen.