

A Sermon for DaySpring
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Turn your Eyes upon Jesus and Live
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21
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“Look at the serpent of bronze and live” (Num. 4:9b).

Look at the poisonous snake and live.

Look at the bronze statue that Moses raised upon a pole and live.

Turn your eyes upon a snake.

Welcome to the Fourth Sunday in Lent. In case you thought this week was all about God so loving the world, both of our readings today bring up a wilderness story about snakes. We’re not getting to the love of God without going through this snake-infested wilderness.

You may recall that the season of Lent mimics Jesus’ forty-day fast and temptation in the wilderness. Through this season, we seek to relate to Christ and grow in faith by letting things go, taking things up, and turning our eyes upon Jesus. This morning, the lectionary has brought us into the Book of Numbers, which you probably know just as well as John 3. While it may seem like an odd turn for the lectionary to make, the Hebrew name for Numbers is “In the Wilderness,” a fitting place for us to journey through in Lent. Here in the wilderness, the Israelites are not singing a familiar tune like “Turn your eyes upon Jesus.” Rather, they are singing their go-to complaint for God and Moses: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” And God has responded with a severe mercy: first death by snakes and then a strange salvation. God calls the Israelites to turn their eyes upon a snake so that they may live.

Last Sunday, Eric preached about God’s severe mercy as we see it in Jesus’ cleansing of the temple. When we stray, God always has mercy for us. We do not serve a God of scarcity, but one of abundance who loves to give. But God’s mercy may be severe, and it will likely not come in the way we ask or plan for it to be given. Today, we are reminded again that we serve a God who holds firmly to both justice and mercy. We serve a God who is so far above our ways that we won’t always understand him. But this God whom we serve can always be trusted to use justice and mercy to bring us back to himself. So long as we turn our eyes upon, well, a snake, at least that’s where our text begins.

In Numbers 21:5, “The people spoke against God and against Moses, [saying] ‘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.’” Have you ever looked in the cabinet at home and said this? You see some flour, canned vegetables, and stale chips, and you say, “There’s nothing to eat here!” but what you really mean is, “There’s nothing good to eat here.” See, God has cared for the Israelites, freed them from slavery, and fed them with mana from heaven. But the mana has gotten old and detestable, the Israelites are sick of wandering through the desert, and the memory of Egypt no longer feels so much oppressive as it feels secure.

At this point in their journey, the Israelites have made this same complaint to Moses about six times, but now they’re really done. So, this time, the Israelites spoke out against God and Moses.

And God had a severe answer for them in verse 6: “Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people so that many Israelites died” (Num. 21:6). And this is just one example of why some people find the God we worship in this beautiful sanctuary and pray to before meals and journal about over coffee absolutely terrifying. According to the text, God sent poisonous snakes to bite and kill the Israelites.

I’ll be honest with you; I have a lot of questions for God about this one. The Psalmist is allowed to cry out to God in anguish and frustration. The prophet Jeremiah laments that he was born and questions if God is really there for him. Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, David, and most of the Old Testament characters we know, and love have sinned grievously against God. And sure, they had consequences, but not poisonous snakes!

I don’t know about you, but sometimes I complain to God too. Just in this Lenten season, when Ash Wednesday fell on Valentine’s Day, and Maundy Thursday is coming on my husband’s birthday and the Ranger’s opening day, I complained to God. I said, “There is no Lent, and this Lent is detestable!” Ok not really, but I wasn’t thrilled that God is making me spend what could be celebratory days thinking about death and sin instead of love and baseball. But God didn’t send snakes on me!

So, why would God use snakes against his chosen people? One ongoing theme for the Israelites, and the disciples and the church in Acts and maybe in your own life, is that God will go to tremendous lengths to bring his people back to himself. There is no price too high to keep God from keeping his people in right relationship with him. For us, the price God pays can feel too high, and texts like this can be quite uncomfortable. Really, God, death so that people will turn to you?

The good news in this story is that the Israelites immediately get it. See verse 7 says, “The people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people.” This perplexing story about a God who is clearly beyond our full comprehension actually makes sense to the Israelites. They know what God is doing. They know what their complaints really were—not just prayers of distress, but proclamations of distrust. The Israelites know that they’ve sinned, and they confess.

I want to pause here in the story and say that while the Bible is not a prescriptive roadmap to exactly what you should do or say in different situations, the Israelites get it right here. When we sin, and especially when we’re called out for our sin, it’s not time to dig in our heels or run away and hide from God. It’s time to confess. It’s time to pray. It’s time to reach out to your community and ask for prayer, just as the Israelites went to Moses for intercession. And when we pray for forgiveness and salvation from a situation, don’t forget that we serve a mysterious God. God doesn’t answer to us; we answer to God. So, don’t be surprised if God moves in strange, slithering ways.

Rather than taking the poisonous snakes away and putting an end to the Israelites’ pain and suffering, God provides a strange antidote. See verses 8-9: “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.’ So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone,

that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.” To clarify here, the Israelites will continue to be bitten. But now, God has provided a way for them to live. Turn your eyes upon a snake.

Now, I’ve read a lot of my Bible. For many years throughout my life, I’ve set out in January to read this whole thing cover to cover. And while I’ve not often succeeded at this, I’ve always made it as far as Genesis 3; so, I know snakes. Snakes are bad. They are the great deceivers who instigated the fall. Snakes are cursed among all animals (Gen. 3:14). We do not like snakes in the Bible, and we definitely don’t like bronze snakes or golden calves or graven images. So, why does God use the image of a snake to save the Israelites?

To begin answering this question, we must keep in mind that God is not only interested in saving the Israelites; he is interested in transforming them. By offering salvation through the very sign of their affliction, their punishment, and their death, God calls the Israelites to really see their sin and turn away from it. The Israelites don’t receive salvation and reconciliation with God without knowing the cost. What would you see if you looked upon the bronze snake after surviving this episode?

You would probably see the people you lost—your loved ones who died before you repented and God sent the bronze snake. Maybe you would feel the sting of a snake bite that God saved you from. Surely, you would remember what brought the snakes in the first place. See, the Israelites spend no time in this story complaining about God once the snakes come. Remember, they own what they’ve done and confess their sin. Gazing upon the bronze snake, I imagine, would lead the Israelites into a compilation of sorrow, shame, regret, pain, and gratitude. Maybe even resolution to continue looking forward, through the bronze snake, toward the one who brought them into new life. And so, a symbol of death also becomes a symbol of life.

“And 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.” (John 3:14-15).

What do you see when you look up at this cross? Do you see that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son for you? Do you see the love? Do you see the sacrifice—God’s death for our lives? Just as the bronze snake raised up cannot only represent mercy and salvation, so too this cross is not only a sign of love and salvation. It is also a sign of God’s justice, of our sin, of the curse that Christ became for us—a snake on a tree. The Bible tells us, cursed is the snake among all animals (Gen. 3:14), and cursed is the one who hangs upon a tree (Deut. 21:23). Cursed is the Son of Man, lifted up for us. A strange and severe mercy.

Taking the image of the bronze snake, Jesus now calls us to turn our eyes upon him. Turn your eyes upon Jesus and believe. Turn your eyes upon Jesus and live in the light. Five times in this passage, John calls us to believe. Five times, he repeats the word “light.” Believe and live in the light. Because you believe, you will have eternal life. Because you believe, you will not be condemned. Because you do what is true, you will live in the light. This is John’s message from Jesus.

And paired with this story from Numbers, we know that believing and being saved does not mean we won’t suffer. A life with God does not lead to painless life—one without hardship,

strife, and death. The Israelites continued to be bitten in the wilderness, even after they confessed and were saved. The disciples believed and proclaimed this message, to their deaths. To live with this hope, with this transformation, with this gift of eternal life does not mean that we live without death and suffering. What it means is that when we drift in the wilderness, when we complain against God, when we spend some time in the darkness, when we experience great pain, loss, and suffering, God will come for us. He may send snakes. But always, God will send an antidote, a way forward, a road to reconciliation, a community to surround us. “For 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 3:17). God may not remove our hardships, but God will come alongside us and show us where to find life amidst the pain. And with this gift of life, we are called to become those who do what is true and come into the light (John 3:21).

But what if you don’t believe? What if you don’t live in the light? What if you’ve done too many things in the darkness? You have too many doubts, too many flaws. You deserve too much judgment. What if you’ve been bitten by a snake, but you can’t look up? What if, it seems, God won’t even send a snake to bring you back? Where is God now?

The invitation from Numbers to John is the same for all of us: turn your eyes upon Jesus and live. And when we look at Jesus, when we see this cross, remember what Jesus’ gift really is for us. Remember what this cross represents—its mercy, its justice, and its cost. Jesus’ mercy is a severe one—one that covers our individual, corporeal, and systematic sin. It’s not just good enough for a few mistakes; it’s enough to save endless generations of sinners. Also, remember that God doesn’t expect the Israelites to write a perfect confession of faith or never stumble in the wilderness again. God simply commands them to look at the bronze snake and live. And Jesus knows his listeners, that his own disciples will flee from him in his greatest hour of need. All Jesus asks of us here is to believe that he is the Son of God. Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Read about Jesus and come to know him in the Scriptures. Hear the word of God preached and make space for him to come into your life. Look to your left and to your right and serve Jesus by loving your neighbors. And as you turn to Jesus, allow God to work, for God is the one who saves us.

The bronze snake does not save the Israelites; God saves them. They are not saved by magic tricks, but by God’s power and grace. The same is true of the cross. We are not saved by a cross and a crucifixion, but by the God who suffered death and then defeated it for all of us. These signs of our salvation are not salvific in themselves. They are not images to be worshipped, but icons to see through to the God who does save us and calls us to worship. As we come to the table this morning, we are invited to see beyond the bread and cup to the body and blood of Jesus Christ given for us. These elements do not save us; God saves us. Turn your eyes now upon him and live.