

Constant Reminders
Numbers 21:4–9; John 3:14–21
Sunday, March 14, 2021

Okay, before we go any further, I feel like we need to stop and acknowledge what a *strange story* this is. The people of Israel complain about food and water in the wilderness, so God sends poisonous serpents that bite and kill them. And the *solution* for this problem is for Moses to make a serpent out of bronze and put it on a pole, and any time anyone gets bit by one of the *real* serpents, they look at the *bronze* serpent, and they live. I mean, I read this, and my initial reaction was, “Why didn’t God just take away the real serpents?!” (We’ll actually get to that.)

I would bet that this is a story that most people aren’t familiar with, because we don’t often delve into the book of Numbers. In the three-year cycle of the lectionary (the calendar of assigned scripture readings for each week), we only hear three stories from the book of Numbers. Three stories over three years is not a lot. This is not a book that we spend a whole lot of time with. But there’s actually a really good reason that we’re reading this today, and it has to do with our *other* scripture reading that we’ll get to in just a moment.

This story from Numbers raises a whole lot of questions and problems for us. The people of Israel complain, and so God sends *poisonous snakes to bite and kill them*? What does that say about the God we worship and serve? What does that say about the pain and suffering that *we* experience in life – that it is sent from God as *punishment for unfaithfulness*? Where is the *love* and the *good news* and the *hope* in *that*?

And we’ve been talking throughout Lent about this idea of *covenant*, the relationship of steadfast love and faithfulness between God and God’s people. The lectionary has been very clear and intentional about its selection of readings dealing with covenant. But what does *this story* have

to do with *covenant*? Because what we said the other week was that covenant embodies the faithfulness of God – that God is faithful, even when we are not, and God keeps God’s end of the deal, even when we do not. But is that what we see here? How does *this story* further the narrative of God’s covenant with the people of Israel and with us?

I was wrestling with these questions this week when I remembered something that happened when I was a teenager. I was around 16, and I was out one night with some friends, just driving around town in my friend’s car. We didn’t have anywhere to go or anything to do. We were just driving around. One of my friends (for some reason) had a slingshot. As we drove past this one building – a strip of shops – my friend rolled down the window and shot a rock or something into the window of one of the shops. It *broke* the window, but it didn’t *shatter* it. It just made a hole with a kind of spiderweb of cracks around it.

As we drove off, I was laughing because I was 16 and everyone else was laughing, but there was a part of me that was terrified. Like, “*He* just broke a window, and *I* am in the car with him, so *we* just broke a window.” I was so scared that we were going to get caught and arrested or whatever. We didn’t, and no one ever found out about it. But the thing was, I had to drive by the place *all the time*. And that window never got repaired. So every time I drove by, I saw that broken window, and it was a reminder of what we had done. I felt *so bad* about it. Even five years later, I would drive by and see it, and it would remind me of this bad thing that I had been a part of. And if I drove by it *today*, 26 years later, even if the window was replaced by now, I would still think about that.

Have you ever done something wrong, and there is a *constant reminder* of it in your life; this thing that never lets you forget about a mistake that you made?

The people of Israel have left 400 years of slavery in Egypt, and they are on their way *back* to Israel, the land that God has promised to them in this covenant. They have spent almost 40 years wandering the wilderness, and in that time, God has provided for them every step of the way. God has provided water in the midst of a desert. God has provided food – quail and manna, this fine flakey bread-like substance – every single day for 40 years. And now they are *just about* to cross over and enter into the promised land – they have *finally arrived* and are at the end of their journey – when they just can't take any more.

It says that the people became impatient and 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.” For *40 years* God has provided food and water, God has been *faithful* to the people of Israel, and now that the journey is almost over, they are complaining about the *quality* of the food that miraculously appeared out of nowhere in the wilderness? This isn't the first time that the people complained. Back when they first left Egypt, they complained that there was no food and water then, so God provided for them. But then it said that the people complained against *Moses*. This time, it says, they complain against *God* and Moses. And I guess God has just had enough complaining. So God sends poisonous serpents that bite them and kill them. Seems like a *bit* of an overreaction to me. When my kids complain, I don't think I would ever throw a poisonous snake into their rooms.

The people realize what they have done wrong, and they go to Moses and say, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prays for the people, but God does *not* take the serpents away from them.

Instead, God tells Moses to *make* a serpent and put it on a pole, and whenever a serpent bites someone, they look at the bronze serpent, and they live.

The serpents *stay among them*. The people realize that they have sinned, and they feel bad about it. But these serpents stay among them as a *constant reminder* of what they have done wrong. Every time they see the serpents slithering around (or get *bit* by one), they are going to remember how they sinned against God. They have this constant reminder that never lets them forget the mistake they have made. But the thing is, the thing that reminds them of their sin is *also* what saves them. Every time someone gets bit by a serpent, they look at the bronze serpent on a pole, and not only are they reminded of how they sinned against God, but they are *healed*.

It wasn't long after that night out with my friends when we broke the window that I had an experience of the presence of God and underwent a transformation in my life and faith. I was embraced by the grace of God, and I became a new person. But that broken window was still there. And every time I drove by it, I saw it and it reminded me of what I had been a part of, what I had done wrong. But it *also* reminded me that I was not that person anymore. That I was loved and forgiven by God, and God had made it possible for me to begin a new life. The thing that reminded me of my mistake, of my *sin*, *also* reminded me of God's grace in my life.

Author James Baldwin had this great line that I quote all the time where he says, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." We cannot move on from our sin and mistakes and pain until we are *confronted* with it and *face* it and *acknowledge* it and *confess* it and *repent* from it. Scripture says it this way in Psalm 32, "While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my

sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the guilt of my sin.” The people of Israel had to face those snakes day after day because it is only by facing our sin, acknowledging it and coming to grips with it, that we can be healed and set free from it. Theologian Alicia Myers says that “to experience healing, the Israelites must look to the serpent raised above them: that is, they must see the image of their sin and acknowledge their wrongdoing in order to accept God’s gift of life.”¹

And so now we come to our second scripture reading, which wouldn’t make sense without *that* story, and also *helps* us make sense out of that story. It’s from the third chapter of John’s gospel, verses 14 through 21, and it contains probably the most well-known verse of scripture, but this context helps us hear those familiar words in a completely different way. So I invite you again to hear the Word of the Lord. Jesus says:

“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. 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. 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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

¹ [Commentary on John 3:14-21 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. Except instead of being lifted up on a pole, Jesus is talking about being lifted up on a *cross*. In his crucifixion, Jesus took upon himself all the sin of the world. So when we look at the cross, we are confronted with our sin, with all the ways that *we* fail to love God and our neighbor, all the ways that we fail to follow Christ in our daily lives. The cross is a constant reminder of our sin. But it is *also* a reminder of our salvation. Because *when* Christ took all the sin of humanity – all *our* sin – upon himself on the cross, he said, “Father, *forgive them.*” *Not*, “Father, punish them. Hold them accountable. Send more snakes.” *Forgive them.* Christ took all our sin and failures and mistakes upon himself *and then let go of it.*

When we look at the cross, we are reminded that we are loved and forgiven by God, and that God had made it possible for us to begin a new life in Christ. Just as the people of Israel looked to the bronze serpent and they lived, we look to the cross in the midst of *our* sin and find the healing that *we* need. The thing that reminds us of our sin *also* reminds us of God’s grace in our lives. We look upon the crucified Christ as a reminder of both our *sin* and our *salvation*.

And *that* is where we see God’s covenant in these readings. It’s easy to look at the story from Numbers and say, “God sent snakes to kill the people after they complained! How is *that* an example of keeping faithful covenant?!” God had provided for the people of Israel time and time again in the wilderness. God was *faithful* to them. When they complained (*again*), it would have been really easy for God to say, “You know what? That’s it. I’m done. After all I’ve done for you every day these past 40 years, you *still* don’t get it! So you go your way, and I’ll go mine.” But God does not break covenant with them. God *stays* with them. God forces them to confront and acknowledge their sin, and God also provides them with a path to healing.

What this story and the crucified Christ show us is that even when we are unfaithful, even when we fall short, God does not give up on us. God does not break covenant with us. God *stays* with us. God might force us to confront and acknowledge our sin and deal with the consequences of our sin, but God also provides us with a path to healing. God does not hold on to our sin or hold it against us. God has let go of it in order to embrace us.

God is faithful, even when we are not. God stays with us, even when we wander away. God forgives us, even when we can't forgive ourselves. *That* is covenant. That is the promise that we have from God through Jesus Christ. And that is how we are called to be with each other, in Christ's name.