

Year B
4th Sunday in Lent
Numbers 21:4-9
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

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

“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” (Jn 3:14). In today’s Gospel reading Jesus refers to a passage in the Book of Numbers—to a time when the Israelites were wandering with Moses in the desert, and Jesus compares what will shortly happen to himself, to this episode in his people’s history. Fortunately we heard that passage in today’s readings, so we can easily look at what seems like a strange comparison. I mean, how is Jesus like the image of a snake on a pole? And why would that matter? Let’s have a look.

For context, you might remember that Jesus is talking with Nicodemus as he is saying these things. Nicodemus, is a Pharisee—part of the religious aristocracy—and he had come secretly, by night to see Jesus. Jesus is trying to explain things to this fearful, skeptical man. Certainly Nicodemus would remember the Moses and serpent story, and see that Jesus was creating an analogy. He would remember that, because the Israelites spoke against God, and against Moses, the Lord had sent poisonous serpents to harass and bite them. Many of them died as a result. However, when they repented their disobedience, the Lord commanded Moses to create a bronze image of the serpents that were killing the Israelites, and raise the image up on a pole. Then anyone who was bitten could look at the bronze serpent, and be cured.

The Hebrew word for a poisonous serpent (literally “fiery” serpent) used here is *seraph*. Do you remember where else we see seraphs? One place is in the book of Isaiah where they are described as fiery, six-winged creatures who participate in Isaiah’s call to ministry, flying around the Lord’s throne, and touching Isaiah’s mouth with a hot coal. But today we often think of them as angels with cute chubby cheeks and diaphanous nightgowns. But no—they are they are serpents. Perhaps here in the Moses story they’re referred to as fiery because their bite gives a

burning sensation as the venom courses through the body. Perhaps they really were flaming. It's hard to know. And snakes have this ambiguous relationship to humankind, don't they: historically they are symbols of wisdom, and fertility, and healing, and death. For instance the symbol of Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine, is a staff with a single snake twined around it called a caduceus. We use this symbol still today. So for the Israelites, the image of their tormentor—the snake—becomes their salvation. In doing this, Moses gives the bronze snake a sacramental nature: it is the outward and physical sign of God's healing, life-giving grace.

But Nicodemus might understandably wonder how in the world Jesus is like that bronze snake. For Jesus to say that he has to be lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness is to say that, in some way he is going to be able to give life to God's people. Jesus says he will do this "so that whoever *believes* in him may have eternal life." This is unlike the serpent on the pole, however; we don't simply have to look at Jesus hanging on the cross to have eternal life, we have to *believe* in him. The word **believe** is key here. Interestingly, it is used more times in John's gospel than in any other place in the New Testament, but we don't find the word "faith" in John at all. Because for John's gospel, belief is not simply an intellectual exercise—it's not simply accepting facts. No, it's obedient action—it is deeds. Notice that Jesus says, "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." Here we see that belief is not all in our heads; belief inspires action in the form of obedience. Then, a bit after this passage, in verse 36, Jesus says, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever *disobeys* the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath." For John, belief is not the opposite of disbelief; belief is the opposite of disobedience. Belief inspires active obedience, or it's not true belief.

So Jesus is going to be lifted up for us in two ways: on the cross, and then to heaven. He is going to be sacrificed in the flesh, rather than recreated in bronze. He knows that he must die in order for *this* lifting up

to take place, and then he will be lifted up to heaven. We have to have the crucifixion in order to have the resurrection—it's like a continuous process. We have to have death in order to have eternal life. This is the basic Christian premise. Death has to come first. Good Friday has to come before Easter.

And so what does our belief inspire us to do in obedience to God's love for us?

I have a colleague who, when she was about 13, was told by her Sunday school teacher that this year they should all give up something that was really *hard* to give up for Lent. She thought about chocolate, or sweets generally, or Mountain Dew, which she drank a lot of. Maybe television (this was a long time ago, before any of us had personal computers or cell phones). As she was pondering this assignment on the way home from church, she told me that her brother Joe was annoying her in the back seat of the car, and she was irritating him right back. She said he was about two years younger than she was, and most of their time together consisted of petty annoyance. In a flash of insight, she realized that picking on him might be very hard to stop. Could she give *this* activity up for Lent? She decided she would try, although she didn't tell anyone about her decision, especially not her brother.

As Lent began, she found that it was actually hard to *realize* when she *was* picking on her brother, much less to stop doing it—it was their default mode. Horrified, she prayed often about this, asking specifically for help in ignoring his teasing. As she increased her awareness, she was more able to do this, and to stop harassing him so *often*. Over the weeks of Lent she actually began to have days in a row where she had only decent interaction with him. By the end of Lent she very seldom teased him, and, miraculously, he had also stopped being so annoying to her.

“That was such a hard process,” she said. “I felt so bad about the fact that I teased him without even realizing it. And it was hard not to fall in with his bad behavior when he was annoying me. But I kept thinking, ‘Jesus loves us both. I can do this. Jesus, please help me do this!’” She said that Lent was the beginning of her appreciation of her brother as a

person, rather than as just pain in the neck. “It got better from then on,” she said, smiling. “I wasn’t perfect, but I started to take my faith more seriously, and ask God to help me to live it, and not just, you know, say it on Sundays.”

For my friend belief took this visible shape with her brother, and grew into a loving relationship. As we wait during this Lent for Jesus to be lifted up at Easter, think about what *you* believe, and what action that requires.

Amen

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