

LENT 4

Year B

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Numbers 21:4-9

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom, but the people became discouraged on the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, “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.” ⁶Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The 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. ⁸And 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.” ⁹So 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.

Commentary from Aidan Stoddart

The Book of Numbers recounts the 40-year-long journey of the ancient Israelites through the wilderness, toward the Promised Land. The way is fraught, and many challenges beset the people as they wander through the desert. Just before the events of today’s text, the Israelites mourned the loss of Moses’ brother, Aaron, and then participated in a successful (but presumably brutal) battle against the Canaanites at Hormah. The community we encounter in this story knows well the ravages of suffering, violence, and death. Therefore, the impatience of the Israelites should be understood sympathetically. When they cry out to God, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” the Israelites are not being melodramatic or fickle. These people are exhausted, traumatized, bereft, and afflicted. It is a very hard thing to follow God in the wilderness.

Challengingly, God responds to the complaints of the people with even more affliction, sending deadly snakes into their midst. The people repent and beg for help. Per God’s instruction, Moses fashions a bronze representation of one of the snakes and sets it on a pole. Whenever someone is bitten by a snake, they look at the bronze icon—and live. Paradoxically, God saves the people from their affliction by inviting them to gaze on the very image of their affliction. The suggestion seems to be that a problem cannot be solved unless it is contemplated and accepted for what it is. Perhaps God is offering a hard but life-giving lesson to God’s beloved people as they suffer in the wilderness: *There is no way around. The only way out is through.*

Discussion Questions

How might modern hearers of this story relate to the beleaguered plight of the Israelites? In what kind of wilderness are we wandering? On what bronze serpent do we need to gaze?

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

- ¹ Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, *
and his mercy endures for ever.
- ² Let all those whom the LORD has redeemed
proclaim *
that he redeemed them from the hand of the
foe.
- ³ He gathered them out of the lands; *
from the east and from the west, from the
north and from the south.
- ¹⁷ Some were fools and took to rebellious ways; *
they were afflicted because of their sins.
- ¹⁸ They abhorred all manner of food *
and drew near to death's door.
- ¹⁹ Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, *
and he delivered them from their distress.
- ²⁰ He sent forth his word and healed them *
and saved them from the grave.
- ²¹ Let them give thanks to the LORD for his mercy *
and the wonders he does for his children.
- ²² Let them offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving * and tell
of his acts with shouts of joy.

Commentary from Aidan Stoddart

“[The LORD’s] mercy endures for ever!” the Psalmist cries out. It is worth spending some time reflecting on what is meant by the noun “mercy.” The Hebrew word is *chesed*, which indeed does mean “mercy,” but the word can also rightly be translated as “goodness,” “love,” or “loving-kindness.” This is a fulsome concept. *Chesed* is more than pity, more than leniency. God’s “mercy” runs far deeper than an indulgent tolerance for the sinful. Rather, the endless *chesed* of God is an orientation of love that grounds God’s action to and for God’s people.

“Some were fools and took to rebellious ways; they were afflicted because of their sins,” verse 17 reads. These same rebels cry out to God in their distress, and out of God’s endless *chesed*, God responds to their pleas with healing, “sav[ing] them from the grave.” Those who were afflicted are given new life; those who had rebelled are reaffirmed as “children” of the Lord. The last word must be a joyful one, for it is *chesed*, and not affliction, that endures forever.

The lectionary invites us to consider Scriptural texts in relationship to each other. It is worth considering how the theology of this psalm might inform our reading of today’s intense story from Numbers. Perhaps the complaining Israelites are an example of “fools” who take to “rebellious ways”—to such fools, the ever-loving, ever-merciful God responds with healing grace. In this light, the bronze serpent could be understood as an instantiation of God’s *chesed*.

Discussion Questions

What is the relationship between God’s affliction and God’s mercy? Do the two contradict each other? If God’s mercy “endures for ever,” what are we to make of those moments when God seems to choose punishment over mercy? Does this psalm resolve this tension?

Ephesians 2:1-10

2 You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, doing the will of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else, ⁴but God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.

Commentary from Aidan Stoddart

Themes of God's healing love/mercy continue in today's reading from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. The passage describes our transition from being trapped in sin to being resurrected through Christ Jesus. Implicit in this salvific transition is a shift in parentage. The letter reports that, when we were still trapped in the "passions of our flesh," under the power of the Enemy, we were "children of wrath." But by the grace of God, we have come to be seated "in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus"; our salvation thus consists of entering into the life of the One who is God's Son and experiencing solidarity with his death and resurrection. In short, through Jesus, we go from being "children of wrath" to being children of God.

Paul (or the Pauline disciples who wrote Ephesians) is eager to remind his readers that this adoption into the Christ reality is not something we achieve ourselves: "This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." God is the sole agent of salvation. God is the subject of almost all the active verbs in this passage. We, being saved, are relegated to a relatively passive role. We do good works only insofar as we are enabled to by God—"for we are what he has made us"; even the faith through which we are saved has its origin in God's prevenient gift. The simultaneous challenge and allure of this passage is that it seems to leave little room for human power or agency.

Discussion Questions

What particular "trespasses" and "passions of our flesh" afflict us in the world today? How do you see God saving us from them?

How can we reconcile this passage's emphasis on Divine agency with our own commitments to accountability and responsibility?

John 3:14-21

¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “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.

¹⁷ “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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ 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.”

Commentary from Aidan Stoddart

John 3:16 is of course one of the most well-loved verses in the New Testament, and though it is often quoted on its own, it takes on deeper meaning when examined in its original context. This passage is part of Jesus’ discourse with the Pharisee Nicodemus, who visits Jesus by night in order to learn from him. The aforementioned famous verse comes directly after Jesus references today’s story from Numbers, comparing his body to the bronze serpent raised on a pole. The “lift[ing] up” of Christ refers not to his resurrection, but to the cross; in the theological schema of John’s Gospel, the cross is the locus of Christ’s glorification and triumph. Jesus seems to be making the following theological connection: when the ancient Israelites were afflicted and killed in the wilderness, they found healing by gazing upon a serpent on a pole. *In the same way, Jesus is saying, those who are afflicted and facing death must gaze upon Christ’s cross if they wish to find healing and life.* The phrase “whoever believes in him” should be understood in the light of this gazing. If you want to believe in Christ, and thus experience his life, then (paradoxically) you should attend to the cross.

This discourse also seems to poke fun at the character Nicodemus. “Those who do what is true come to the light,” Jesus says—but Nicodemus has come to Jesus in the darkness. Does he act falsely, then? Perhaps. And yet there is hope for Nicodemus, because even though he has acted in the darkness, he has encountered the light—for as John 1:4 and 1:9 proclaim, in Jesus is the light that enlightens all people.

Discussion Questions

What does it mean to “believe” in Jesus? How does this passage illuminate the nature of Christian “belief?”

How might readers relate to Nicodemus? Do we seek Christ in the “darkness” or in the “light?”