FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
Ann Arbor | Michigan

March 14, 2021

Fourth Sunday in Lent
Numbers 21: 4-9
John 3: 14-21
The Rev. Dr. Richard E. Spalding, Interim Pastor

Light and Shadow

You may have noticed that the first reading this morning takes us back to the wilderness journey of the people Israel out of Egyptian bondage, on their long and arduous way to the Land of Promise. We spent most of the Sundays of last fall together here retracing that journey in the book of Exodus – but this story of the infestation of poisonous or (literally, in the Hebrew) "fiery" serpents,[1] and the startling antidote to snakebite, appears only in the book of Numbers. The story catches the people complaining (which, as you may remember, is not hard to do) about the dangers and discomforts of the desert. God grows impatient with their impatience, their failure to trust God's benevolent intentions – and God sends the snakes as a come-uppance. Then the people make the crucial connection between the increase in their suffering and their rebellious attitude toward God, and they repent (which may be the reason why the story is included in the lectionary for Lent, the season of repentance). They plead with Moses to intercede on their behalf with God – which is one of the things that Moses does best, having had lots of practice. But God's compassionate response to these entreaties takes a surprising form: instead of simply retracting the plague by calling off the serpents, God instructs Moses to create a bronze effigy of a snake and lift it up on a pole – such that anyone who merely looks upon it can be healed. It works like – well, one might want to say, like a charm – and, snakes or no snakes, the Israelites are up and on their way again in the direction of the future that God has been pointing to all along.

To be honest, this is not a story one particularly likes to tell – because the idea of God being so aggravated by the people's complaints as to send snakes to punish them, together with the idea that just a glance at a bronze effigy has the power to cure snakebite, pushes most of us beyond the edges of both piety and credulity. But there's a

[1] The Hebrew adjective, serapin, connotes burning. Note the obvious etymological connection with the seraphim, the fiery angels who participate in the mystical vision of Isaiah at the time of his call as a prophet of God (Isaiah 6). Much as the angels help to purify Isaiah in preparation for his prophetic work, the snakes in Numbers 21 are, in a sense, agents of purification for the Israelites after their rebellion against God's providence – so perhaps there's something holy about the fiery quality they have in common.

particular reason why this episode has found its way into our Lenten contemplations – and you'll hear that reason right away as we listen, now, to the second of this morning's readings from scripture – from the 3rd chapter of the Gospel of John:

> *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 God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*
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> *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.*

These are some of the best-known and most deeply loved words of the gospel – and the metaphors of light and darkness they offer may help give us a bit clearer view of some of the resonances between the ancient story of rebellion and repentance in the book of Numbers and our ways of understanding God's presence when we suffer.

From the point of view of the Israelites in the desert, choking down another daily ration of manna before pulling up stakes yet again on a journey with no end in sight, being enslaved in Egypt seemed preferable: at least the expectations were clear, and the food was better. But from God's point of view, for people who were meant to be free to choose bondage instead was a way of turning toward darkness and away from the light – turning the back on God's call into the future. The light of God's care does what any light does: it clarifies and casts shadows. It both indicts and forgives; it exposes what is less than noble about us even as it reveals the means of redemption. Seeing the bronze serpent "lifted up" spurs the remembrance both of rebellion *and* of the gracious rescue of God – in one eye-full! And notice that the bronze serpent doesn't make the danger disappear: God doesn't call off the snakes! But it does provide a means of coping with the danger, surviving the danger. And, even more, it stirs the memory of the restoring touch of God in the midst of the danger.

The snake-on-a-pole makes one final appearance in the Hebrew scriptures – many generations later. We know, thanks to a single verse in the Book of II Kings, that the bronze effigy actually made it all the way to the Promised Land, where it was preserved as a souvenir, on display in the sacred precincts of the Temple. Evidently over time it became something of an idol, a celebrity object venerated in exactly the way expressly forbidden by the first of the ten commandments – because, says that single verse in Second Kings, King Hezekiah, a particularly pious reformer, "broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for… the

people of Israel had [been making] offerings to it (18:4)." Long gone were the memories of turning toward God on the long journey of learning to trust in God's compassionate presence.

Of course, that effigy has reappeared much more recently – as an emblem of the medical profession.[2] These days, when the symbol of the serpent entwined around a pole is used that way, it probably doesn't carry much of any overtly theological significance any more. But it's a long journey for many people even now, isn't it, to come to trust the care of which the symbol is still trying to speak. It's not a small thing to trust the transformation of the deadly into the life-giving. So maybe it's helpful to remember that sometimes we need to look upon what we don't want to see in order to help us heal. Sometimes maybe it's helpful be able to look up and see a sign that says that compassion is practiced here – a sign that calls forth the memory of healing by the shadow that pointed to the light, a sign of death that kept us holding on to life.

"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," says the writer of the Gospel of John, "so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." There's a rich layer of extra meaning in the Greek word for "lifted up," *hypsoo*: it can also mean "exalted." The resonance between crucifixion and exaltation is a recurring theme in the gospel of John – so much so that Jesus can seem, at times, almost eager to embrace the cross. I think it's important for us to read this gospel carefully enough to see both the light and the shadow cast by the cross. The gospel of John asks us to look upon the cross as the instrument, not only of Jesus's suffering and death, but also of his rising up – and ours. God's love for the world extends to that limit: to Jesus's entering that deeply into the sundry agonies of our human existence. By the light of the cross, John would say, we can clearly see both our own turning away – our complicity in the senseless and needless murder of a supremely innocent man – and also God's turning toward us nonetheless. Shadow and light. Fr. Richard Rohr writes that "the cross was meant to be an inoculation against all sacralized violence."[3] The words of the gospel reassure us, as Moses reassured the desert wanderers, that the compassion of God is embedded even in this emblem of death – and that, if we turn toward it, lift ourselves up to gaze upon it, we will find life enough to pick up the journey again, and head in the direction of the future – to which God has been pointing all along.

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[2] The symbol – a lone snake entwined around a pole – is known as the Rod of Asclepius, and evokes the Greek god of healing. It's frequently confused with a symbol that includes a pair of entwined snakes and a set of wings – associated with the god Hermes/Mercury and connoting commerce. Both symbols have been used in relation to medicine – though the former has more authentic roots in the matrix of the healing arts in ancient Mediterranean cultures.

[3] Richard Rohr, "Doing the Victim Thing Right," Center for Action and Contemplation, April 16, 2019 [https://cac.org/doing-the-victim-thing-right-2019-04-16/].

This may all seem very arcane and theological… But perhaps you've already noticed a way in which this paradox of shadow and light is quite real these days, alive and well – quite literally – among us and even within us. What is vaccination, after all, but receiving a small dose of the very thing that might kill us? So, after weeks and months of keeping the most vigilant distance we possibly could from the deadly virus, we now find ourselves all waiting in line to have it touch down in the infinitesimal midst of our biology – because that's how it does its work. Jesus's ministry began, as we discovered at the beginning of Lent, with an exhortation to everyone he could get to listen to *turn*: to repent, to change, to know how real the shadow is and to choose light anyway, to pivot toward God while there is still time. Now, as Lent deepens, we find that the strength we need is ours, not when we turn away from the emblem of mortality but, of all things, when we turn toward it. The way toward the relief we crave is to be found in contemplating the very thing from which we long to be delivered.

Because, my friends – as you know, and as God knows – we are made of light and shadow. We all know the impatience, the rebellion, the exhaustion; we've all chafed at the disappointments and felt the fiery sting when things that happen along the way sink their teeth into our best hopes and brightest dreams. And we know, too – almost as much, I think – about the way that compassion can make the wounds bearable, even heal them. Richard Rohr says that "we are invited to gaze upon the image of the crucified to soften our hearts toward suffering, and to know that God's heart has always been softened toward us, even and most especially in our suffering."[4] We are made of light and shadow. And it matters to remember that healing doesn't just happen. It is real, it has depth and heft and volume and it has been lifted up – but we have to lift our eyes to meet it, to contemplate the darkness we know and to turn toward the light, scraping together whatever belief we have, whatever we can call faith for now, and trust that God's fathomless compassion is being practiced here, where the shadow points toward the light.

And when we lift our eyes to make soul-contact with the remembrance of having been known, held, accompanied – by God, of course, and by the numberless others whom God has enlisted to pour out some of God's love upon us, day by day – well, then, it becomes possible to start again in the direction of the future where God has been pointing all this time. When we lift our eyes to engage with the sign of death which has not gone away and will not go away, any more than the snakes ever went away, what we see is the emblem of the depth of God's own heart, pouring out love. Oh, death is not gone; there is always shadow where there is light. But it isn't the main thing anymore. Because the main thing about God is how much God loved – loves – the world. And the sign of that, to which we lift our eyes, is enough to start us on the way again.

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