

Jesus lifted for us

Lent 4 - 2024

Numbers 21:4-9

4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way.

5 The 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."

6 Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.

7 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.

8 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."

9 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.

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."

Introduction:

Message

Jesus Lifted for us

We are four weeks in on a lenten journey tracing Jesus' steps to the cross and beyond to the resurrection. We are being taken, if only virtually, on that cross-resurrection shaped journey that is the basis and form of Christian discipleship. It's a story of death and new life as pioneered by Jesus.

In today's lectionary readings we have two portions of scripture presented in such a way that they throw light on each other. We have a strange story about the people of Israel on their exodus wilderness journey about Moses raising a copper or brass snake on a pole for relief from snakebites and we have a portion of John's Gospel with perhaps the most quoted verse of Christian scripture, John 3:16.¹

I believe both the snake story and the interpretation and reapplication of that story by John the Evangelist say the same thing to us about how to view and enter God's salvation. The story in Numbers speaks to John's gospel and John's gospel speaks to the Book of Numbers.

¹ For some Christians this verse about God loving the world is almost a sufficient summary of the whole Gospel. In the late 1980s and occasionally in recent years I have watched sports events on television where a spectator raises a card before the camera or appears with a T-shirt clearly showing 3:16. This is not the record time to beat but a very subtle bit of TV evangelism which might ring for some but is meaningless for others if not most of the watching millions.

I will try to step into that mutual witness between Old Testament and New Testament witness by focusing on a single word in that well known verse, John 3:16. The word is ‘gave’, g-a-v-e.

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

John 3:16
For God so loved the world that he
gave his only Son, so that
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life

In isolation that sounds wonderful. God gave us his son so that we may have eternal life. It could be a Christmas sort of message. This is the danger of taking a verse in isolation of its context or tearing the Old Testament away from the New Testament. The danger is that we fill in meaning with our imagination or preferred interpretation.

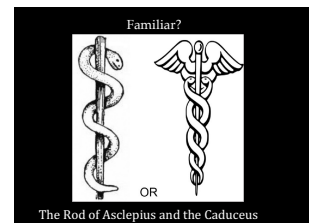
Verse 16 begins with the word ‘For’ which indicates it is part of an argument or developed statement. So we need to consider what leads up to this, ‘For God so loved the world’ and which takes us back to v.14.

John 3:14-15
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.

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.

And just like that we are sent back to the Book of Numbers and a story about the people being healed from snake bites through looking at a snake raised high on a pole.

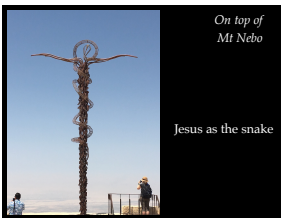
I have been reflecting on this snake image for some time and have come to recognize it as strangely present in wider culture as medical people may recognise. Part of its symbolism is rooted here in Numbers 21.²



In this we are hearing a vague reference to the end of Jesus’ journey on earth as he was raised on a wooden cross. This being raised on a cross like the snake on a pole is what informs the phrase “God so loved the world that he **gave** his only Son”. You

² For a full consideration go to <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4439707/#:~:text=Caduceus%20is%20a%20symbol%20with,one%20with%20a%20single%20snake.>

can't miss it. God's love for us led to giving his one Son which would lead to him being raised on a cross.



I saw what I think is a brilliant appreciation of this in a metal sculpture in one of my favourite places a few years ago. I hope you can see it clearly here as both the snake on the pole and Jesus on his cross are brought together.³

Interpretations.

Through looking at the most innocent Sunday school gospel memory verse we have just stepped into the strange world of the Bible and been reminded that God does not operate as we might expect or prefer. To make some sense of what John the evangelist says I needed to spend some time back with Moses on the Exodus wanderings prior to the snake on the pole.

The book of Numbers has the setting of a people about to experience change. Their desert wandering days are coming to an end and the river Jordan is not far away. They are a people on the edge of the known and unknown so they do a lot of counting!

During their wanderings they have built up the peculiar tradition of murmuring. That's right, God's people had learned and perfected how to moan, complain, murmur, winge, gripe, grizzle and grumble to the point where they were convinced that being slaves back in Egypt might have been a better deal than trusting God for all their needs in the wilderness.

- On two occasions they have complained about having no water and food, and God has provided for them (Exod. 17:1-7; Num. 20:2-13).
- They have complained about the "miserable food" God provided in the form of mana and quails. (Exod. 16:1-36).
- They have complained before God gave them the Law and after God gave them the Law.
- They complained so much that they crossed the line from reasonable complaint to become a people with no conception of how God was caring for them and very little idea of what it meant to have faith in God. The complaining caused people to forget their new identity as God's people, a unique people who are called to follow the leading of God's prophet, Moses.

³ Created by Italian artist Fian Paolo Fantoni.

So here they are, being prepared to take a crucial step in faith and the moaning has simply taken over. With that in mind the story may simply speak for itself:

⁴ From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way.

⁵ The 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."

Now put yourself in God's position. What would you do? The people were impatient but I think God had a better claim to being tested here. That they speak against Moses is to be expected but they speak against God too?! Well like it or not God has a response:

⁶ Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.

Whatever image of God we hold the text is plain. God *sent* the snakes. The same God who sent rain, quails and the same God who would send his son *sent* snakes. The Hebrew word translated poisonous is literally 'fiery' which probably indicates the effect of their bite. It caused heat and inflammation. Jesus would one day assure people that God is a good heavenly father who would not give a scorpion if one asked for an egg or a snake if one asked for a fish.⁴ The principle is that our good God gives us what we really need. These people were so into complaining and so convinced of their cause that they needed a wake up call. The carrot no longer worked so out came a stick.

A hundred years ago, and still sometimes today, it was intellectually fashionable to think that the God of the Old Testament was not the same God as that of the New. Would the Father of Jesus Christ discipline his people in the same way? I don't have time to quote them all but there are New Testament passages particularly in the letter to the Hebrews which indicate yes, God disciplines those he loves.⁵ For example; Revelation. 3:19:

I reprove and **discipline** those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent.

It worked as God intended and the stronghold of complaint was broken. People

⁴ Luke 11:11 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

⁵ Heb. 12:5 And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children— "My child, do not regard lightly the **discipline** of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; Heb. 12:7 Endure trials for the sake of **discipline**. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not **discipline**? 8 If you do not have that **discipline** in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. 9 Moreover, we had human parents to **discipline** us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? Heb. 12:11 Now, **discipline** always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Rev. 3:19 I reprove and **discipline** those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent.

came to their senses and remembered who God was, who they were as God's people, Who Moses was as God's provided leader and what needed to happen, in a word repentance. So we read:

⁷ 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.

Now something interesting happens as God provides for the people to be healed at the level of their illness. The problem was not simply snake bites but lack of gratitude and trust in God. The people had lost sight of who they were and what God had given them. The pain had got their attention. Now they needed to learn and be healed at a deeper level.

⁸ 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."

⁹ 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.

Now we really know that God is not what we might expect! What on earth is going on here? The copper, brass or bronze form of a snake does not effect the healing. The healing comes from their faith in God (v. 7). Their faith is proved by their obedience in following Moses' instructions and turning toward the serpent. As they do that, they actually look beyond it and find the healing mercy of God.

Looking upward, they were to discover the source of their healing through the snake to see God. They would never give thanks for healing to the brass snake on a pole. They would give thanks to God for his mercy and providing Moses to intercede for them.



John 3

We may now move back to the Gospel of John to see how it affirms that the Son of Man is to be lifted up so that we can see the passionate love of God for the world. The sight itself however is so loathsome and horrible, that we have difficulty recognizing that this is how God has chosen for the glory of God to appear in our world. Yet nothing less can heal us.

By looking toward the crucified Christ, the believer looks beyond it to the God who redeems. The symbol of the bronze serpent and the cross are signs of divine involvement in the people's journey toward understanding, repentance and

reconciliation with God. In this case it will not just be ‘life’ given to the one who looks up to the Son of Man, but ‘eternal life’ – his life.

God gives us what we really need which may mean showing us ourselves and himself with a clarity through a lens that is less than comfortable.

At the bottom of all this the simple equation endures: the cure for snakes is a snake; the cure for human life is one man's life; the cure for death is death. Nothing less will do. Those whose eyes follow the Son of man as he is lifted up see God's healing of the world. In the Gospel of John it is not the cross itself but the transactions behind the cross that restore us to wholeness. Hidden in the crucifixion is the exaltation of the Son of Man and God's desire to heal the world.

Conclusion:

So let me end by infilling the Gospel images offered in John's Gospel with what we heard about the lesson of the snakes in the wilderness.

- God so loved the world, suffering not because it is bitten by snakes but tasting and suffering the prospect of eternal death, the woundedness and inflammation of life infected by sin.
- God so loved that world that he gave his only Son to publicly bear the out-workings of all that upon himself through being tortured on a stake of execution, a cross.
- God did that once and for all so that all people could look upon his son and catch a glimpse or a fuller revelation of God's love and God's desire to save and not to condemn.

Might we still be bitten by snakes? It can happen and from experience it is not only snakes that bite. Might we lapse into grumbling? It is not impossible. The lesson for us, perhaps not only in Lent but everyday, is what do we do next? Where do our eyes go after being bitten or lapsing into grumbles and complaint?

Friends, our eyes need to go to him who God gave and was lifted up. Our eyes need to consider his suffering and look beyond to catch a fresh glimpse of the love behind it. When we practice this discipline we will see with wonder that when we lift our eyes from our grumbles or any bites we endure and lift Christ crucified in our sight, the one lifted up will himself draw us and others unto himself revealing the love of God.