



Brazen Serpent atop Mount Nebo in Jordan, metal sculpture, freestanding Giovanni Fantoni, 20th century

March 10, 2024

Numbers 21:4-9 & John 3:14-21

A Covenant of Hope

Prayer: Gracious God as Jesus Christ has been lifted in the wilderness of our lives, as we bear our own burdens, help us to turn our heads towards you and look up to the things that bring healing. When we witness pain and injustice in the world, help us to hold that together in faith with the knowledge and mystery of your unending love and knowledge that you are reconciling all things even now. We give thanks that you have already reconciled us to yourself, make us your reconciling people...

I have always thought I should learn to like snakes; I have tried several times to teach myself to like snakes -- but I do not. It did not take. I understand what an important part in the ecosystem they play. I appreciate their help keeping mice out of the yard, and the house. I respect them. I have taught my children to respect them. But the way they move and the element of surprise – no thanks. I grew up with a horse in Oregon. My horse never liked snakes either. Nothing worse out on the trail, than looking down and realizing you are about to step on a coiled snake. Whether you are a horse, a human, or a snake, this is terrifying. All three of us – horse, girl, snake-- scared out of our wits. Respectively.

Of all snakes, in Oregon I learned to appreciate the northern pacific rattlesnakes the most. Yes, I know, they are poisonous, but they are honest, they are afraid of everyone, they give you fair warning, alerting you to their presence ahead of time. Rattlesnakes do not surprise anyone. They start rattling – loudly -- all they want is for you to go away, they are not aggressive, you may not see them directly, but you can hear where they are, you can back away. The snake quiets down, and you can go on your way without bothering them. No one gets surprised, no one gets injured. We have a mutual understanding. As a bonus, they patrol the area and keep the mice under control. I loved that they could alert me to where they were, and we did not have to see each other at all.

Our scripture today is about snakes, among other things...

For background: there are poisonous vipers in the Sinai wilderness, still. Part of the shaping of the children of Israel into a new people in the wilderness is for them to learn to trust God in all circumstances which includes, for them, trusting Moses' leadership, even in the presence of snakes... The children of Israel are in the habit of complaining; and rather than assuaging their complaints, their fears are dialed up when they encounter poisonous snakes, not polite Northern Pacific rattlesnakes, these are of the aggressive biting variety. Depending on your translation the snakes may be poisonous or fiery. The fire is in the venom. If a venomous snake bites you – it burns. It feels like fire – get it? Moses' bronze serpent on a staff goes against science, and it goes against reason; it is an act of faith. *Look up and live*. The rod with the bronze serpent

is also found as the symbol for the medical community. Two snakes on a staff; called the Rod of Asclepius. This is a formative moment in our cultural imagination.

This comes at the end of a series in the book of Numbers, of what scholars call the “murmuring stories in the wilderness” that are recounted in the story of the exodus from Egypt by the children of Israel. Throughout their journey the people grumble, or “murmur” among themselves, complaining about their conditions – no food, no water – and then to emphasize, although they say they have no food, then they say *they do not like the food they do have when they have it*. They were happy to receive manna in the wilderness, until they got tired of eating manna and nothing else. The murmuring or complaining texts are directed towards Moses and God and are met by turns with either a solution to the problem (manna and quail, and freshwater), or a rebuke that they have not kept faith in the wilderness journey, understanding that God will sustain them.¹ That is the big point. God cares for us and understands our needs.

This pattern of complaining comes to this climax when poisonous snakes are sent among them. Rather than continuing the cadence of complaining followed by blessing or rebuke, now their fearfulness turns to crisis. Many of us are afraid of snakes; count yourself fortunate if you are not. The bronze serpent is provided for focus to look up.

We can also see in this text the arc of a story of repentance, forgiveness, and restored relationship; as the children of Israel realize their complaining has been a disservice to Moses’ leadership and to the spiritual purpose of their time in the wilderness together. In the Bible, rebellion against God takes the form of faithlessness. And those who are ‘unfaithful’ or ‘untrusting’ are unreliable toward one another as well as toward God. This is the opportunity when their fear may turn to faith. Or not.

When the Gospel of John refers to this event, it is not only to the image of the bronze serpent compared with the cross of Jesus, but it is also emphasizing the quality of their relationships: the confession of sin, assurance of pardon, and the restoration of relationship. Look up, be healed, move from fear to faith. The cross is the symbol of this covenant. A covenant of hope.

‘Faith’ in the Bible is regularly understood as ‘trust’ rather than ‘belief.’ Moses did not expect or challenge people to ‘believe’ in specific doctrines or precepts *about God*, but rather through the law offered them a way of life, a process, to follow to remain in *relationship with God*. God would keep the divine commitment to lead the people into a new land, and to live with them wherever their lives took them.

¹ Numbers 11, 14, 16, 20 all carry stories of complaining “murmuring” in the desert.

When we are fearful it is often our instinct to focus our attention on the thing we fear, (which intensifies our fear) rather than to redirect our gaze to the things that will bring healing. I had to learn to pull my focus away from the coiled snake, and look instead for safe ground, at a reasonable distance – trail awareness.

I used to work with someone who had a theater background. She taught me about how to pull focus in worship. E.g., someone lighting a candle at the beginning of worship pulls focus appropriately, setting a tone. In our lives, Problems pull focus. Moses told them in Numbers “look up and live!”

Look up. Re-focus. This is where we find our healing, how we heal, and how we participate in the healing of the world. It is a covenant of hope. Look up.

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Ethiopian Processional Cross

15th century

Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD