



Numbers 21:4-9
Year B



Even though we must always keep the narrative of God's grace, mercy and providence front and center in our proclamation, these verses will not let us ignore the fact that *God has had it with the Israelites*. To tell the truth, this is not the first time.

Turn back to Numbers 11, 14 or 20. Complaint upon complaint upon complaint kindles God's anger. The Israelites complain about water, so God provides water. They complain about food, and God gives them manna. Then they complain about the monotony of manna. In an interlude, God provides absurd amounts of quail while also punishing those who complained about manna (Numbers 11). Nonetheless, the Israelites continue to grumble about the lack of variety in their diet.

But there is more: They start claiming that things were better in the past. "It wasn't *really* so bad back in Egypt" (Numbers 11:4-6, 14:4). Except it was. In the immortal words of Yogi Berra, "Nostalgia ain't what it used to be." What they remember is a lie.

Finally, God is over it. Snakes rather than quail overrun their camp.



Numbers is not a real-time account of history. Nobody in the Israelite camp looked around at the slithering mass and thought, “Why did it have to be snakes?” before whipping out a papyrus to record the event for posterity.

In his *Interpretation* commentary, Dennis Olson writes, “The book of Numbers was the product of the Jewish Community’s struggle to understand the pain and punishment of exile and its implications for Israel’s relationship to God, Israel’s definition as a people, and Israel’s posture toward the promised land, which had been lost but was now about to be regained.”

Numbers is a record of Israel’s attempt to understand what went wrong. Most scholars believe that Numbers, as well as the other books of the law including Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, reached its present form in the post-Exilic or Second Temple period after the Babylonian captivity. These books interpret previous written and oral history informed by recent events. The priests who wrote Numbers, thus, looked at their old stories with a fresh eye and a new theme emerged: They had failed to trust God. They had failed to trust the *love* of God. They had failed to trust the *promises* of God.

No doubt the Israelites encountered plenty of snakes while they wandered in the wilderness, but the snakes in Numbers 21 are different. These are the snakes that overrun God’s people when self-reliance replaces dependence on God’s grace, when complaints outrun the

gratitude for which we were made, and when lies overshadow the light of God's love. And these snakes bite.

In the symbolism of the ancient world, a snake can be a symbol of evil and chaos or fertility, life and healing. What seems to make the difference is the posture a person assumes to the snake. In today's Scripture, we see that a snake on the ground is a snake of chaos and evil, but a snake on the pole is a snake of healing and rebirth.

Are we looking down, obsessed with our efforts, fearful and mistrustful of God's blessings? Or are we looking up, relying on the goodness of God, trusting in God's grace and rejoicing in the abundant life that is unfolding before us? In Numbers, it comes down to trust.

Let me caution against interpreting this lesson through the lens of the prosperity gospel. The lesson is not that all will be well if you trust in God. That's not what the story says, is it?

The story never claims that those who look up at the bronze serpent won't get bitten. It says that they are *healed*. That is the promise of the gospel. In life, we will be bitten, but we will also be healed.

When Jesus is deep in a conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus, he returns to the image of the snake on the pole as a metaphor for the endless love of God for creation. Jesus says, "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” (John 3:14-15). Then he says those words of hope: “For God so loved the world...” (John 3:16).

In the cross of Jesus Christ, God assumes a posture of love toward us, surprising our solipsism with a love greater than we could ask or imagine. When Moses put the snake on the pole, the Israelites had to look up, to look to God.

And when, at the end of Lent, the cross of Jesus Christ compels us again to look up, it will be to God, whose providence is always, ultimately, the source of all healing.

Questions for reflection

1. What prevents us from seeing the goodness of God?
2. In what ways are we tempted to assume a posture that turns us toward what harms us instead of what heals us?
3. What *tangible* thing might we do, this week, to help our community look up and see the healing and life God is waiting to give us?