

Fourth Sunday in Lent

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.

Theological Perspective When Christian interpreters read this passage in Numbers, it is almost impossible not to jump immediately to the Gospel of John and Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus ([John 3:1-21](#)). In response to the Pharisee leader's questions about participation in the "kingdom of God," Jesus was remembered as saying, finally, "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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" ([John 3:13-15](#)). For the writer of the Gospel this extended conversation with Jesus pointed forward to Jesus being "lifted up" on the cross, from the grave, and into the heavenly realm of God. Moses' experience in the wilderness was understood as a type pointing to a spiritual event in the future, namely, the redemptive work of Jesus. The account in Numbers, however, has theological significance quite apart from Jesus. First, this story stands at the end of a series of "murmuring stories" that provide narrative structure for the wilderness traditions. From the beginning the people grumbled and complained about their condition in the desert ([Exod. 16:2-3](#)). Their complaints are noted at several different points along the way (e.g., [Num. 11](#), [14](#), [16](#), [20](#)), but come to a climax in [Numbers 21](#). The failure to trust God (and God's intermediary, Moses) is the basic issue.

"Faith" in the Bible is regularly understood as "trust" rather than "belief." Moses did not challenge the people to "believe" in some doctrine about God. The aim of Moses was for the people to move forward trusting that God would keep the divine commitment to lead the people to a new land. In the immediately preceding verses ([Num. 21:1-3](#)) Israel had won a victory over the Canaanites after appealing for divine assistance. But then, as was regularly the case when one considers the long history of Israel's relationship with God, the people lapsed into their untrusting, unfaithful attitude and "spoke against God and against Moses" ([21:5](#)). Usually in the Bible, rebellion against God takes the form of faithlessness. And those who are "unfaithful" and "untrusting" are quite often unreliable toward one another as well as toward God. There is a second important theological issue imbedded in this passage. What is the function of the bronze snake that Moses hoisted up before the people? For many, religious icons—indeed religion itself—are symbols connected with a belief in magic. The bronze snake to such folk was intended to assure people that divine, supernatural powers could be marshaled whenever needed to

alleviate a human difficulty, namely a plague of venomous, hurtful reptiles. Such magical signs were believed to ward off evil and provide protection. All a sufferer had to do was look upon the magic icon, and relief was assured. In the course of Christian history some have considered the elements of the communion table in this way, but of course this is not a proper understanding.

Closely connected to such a magical approach was an even more dangerous possibility, at least from the Bible's point of view: idolatry. Deeply rooted in Israel's tradition was the prohibition against creating any image as a representative of the divine. The second commandment forbids all such representations ([Exod. 20:4-6](#); [Deut. 5:8-10](#)). The worship or reverencing of anyone or anything other than God was a deadly error. It was utterly foolish to put trust in inert, unhearing, uncaring human creations. Such a perversion was a certain road to destruction (e.g., [Exod. 32:1-10](#); [Isa. 40:18-20](#); [41:21-28](#); [44:9-20](#); [46:1-7](#); [Jer. 10:1-16](#); [Pss. 115:3-8](#); [135:15-18](#)). Paul, in his letter to the Romans, brought the biblical understanding of the connection of idolatry to sinful rebellion and death to forceful expression ([Rom. 1:18-32](#)). Idolatry has continued on the list of warnings that Jewish and Christian leaders regularly and rightly cite to their people.

Moses' bronze snake could easily have become an idol. In ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, representations of snakes were often used as symbols for various deities, mostly dangerous ones, but sometimes the bringers of healing and fertility. Indeed, centuries later King Hezekiah, during a religious reform, removed from the temple "the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan" ([2 Kgs. 18:4b](#)). Thus we are reminded that things intended for one purpose can be turned to another. For some, the noblest of virtues can become twisted into icons of self-adulation. Nation, wealth, power, religion—we know the possibilities.

Finally, this passage prompts us to reflect once again, particularly in this Lenten season, about the relation between repentance and forgiveness. The first response of God to the clamorous, faithless griping of the Israelites was to send snakes among them as punishment ([Num. 21:6](#)). We do not like to consider that sin should receive judgment, but there is every reason it should. Certainly the continuing debate about the character and effectiveness of the atonement worked by Jesus suggests that judgment and punishment of sin is an important consideration.

More to the point of Lent, however, is that repentance is very much a possibility and a desire from God's point of view. When the Israelites recognized their transgression, they came to Moses and asked for his intercession to God on their behalf ([Num. 21:7](#)). Repentance is hardly ever a completely individual and private affair. Most of the time a candid admission of sin—unlike the generalized, one-size-fits-all kind often offered in corporate worship—requires the recognition of how one's individual (or a community's) behavior has harmed others. Each individual has to take responsibility for his or her behavior. Forgiveness and healing are readily available, but faithful repentance is necessary. As the apocryphal or deuterocanonical book Wisdom of Solomon notes, "For the one who turned toward it [the bronze serpent] was saved, not by the thing that was beheld, but by you, the Savior of all" ([Wis. 16:7](#)). This was not magic or idolatry, but faith, and no one could do it for another.

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.