

Thirsting

Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:14-21

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Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Numbers 21:4-9

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

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. “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. “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.”

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In 2006 there was a movie that did not do too well at the box office, and perhaps that was because by the title alone people’s imaginations could do what the director and the cinematographers had created for the big screen. And that was certainly more than enough. The movie’s title was, ‘*Snakes on a Plane.*’

Whatever image you have in your mind, I ask you to pay attention to it, to hold onto it, for a brief time. It’s an unnerving, jumpy, intimidating place to be. You are trapped in a dangerous situation with no one to help you. You are vigilant and on high alert. The dread of what could happen next is paralyzing. There’s certainly only one horrible, painful way out of this.

What you are feeling, what you are imagining, is very similar to what our ancient Israelite faith ancestors experienced on their way from Mount Hor when God had had enough of their complaining, their forgetting to live a commanded life of worship and confidence and trust. It had been 40 years since the plagues of blood and frogs and flies and firestorms and locusts and darkness and death that led the Israelites to freedom from Egyptian slavery. Now their impatient and bitter complaining about just quails and manna to eat, about not enough water once again,

about all the time wandering in the wilderness, and about their questioning if God was really doing good for them, had finally angered God enough to teach the people a lesson. In spite of all that God had done, and was doing for them, the Israelites had fallen back into the old patterns of deprivation, into a slavery and scarcity mindset.ⁱ So God sent down a large number of poisonous snakes. Like the movie, *'Snakes on a Plane,'* like life today among dangerous serpents, some people were bitten, and some even died.

Enough people were being bitten that they grew afraid, again, only this time they blamed themselves instead of God. Decades ago the Egyptian leaders learned of God's power and plan through the plagues, now the freed people had their own memories remind them of knowing that God did in fact have power and a plan. Their distrust, their anger, with God and with Moses, turned inward, and they turned to Moses to pray to God to take away the snakes.

God heard Moses' prayer but did not answer it in the way the people had hoped or expected. God did not take away the snakes, these scaly reminders that life is best lived with great care and attention, but God did give them a way to be healed when they ran afoul, intentionally or accidentally, of a snake. In a time before anti-venom existed, the people needed something that sure looks like magic to us. God had them build a bronze serpent. When they looked at it, they were healed.ⁱⁱ

That is indeed a strange twist to a strange story. The serpent that bites and kills is also the serpent that heals and give life.

Yet is it any wonder that Jesus would one day compare his own death on the cross to the serpent Moses lifted up in the wilderness? The serpent that kills can also bring life. The cross that kills will also bring life. Eternal life is found in the Son of Man lifted up on a cross. The empty tomb of resurrection is already hidden in the crucifixion.

Moses lifted up the serpent for anyone bitten by a snake in the wilderness to need only look up at Moses' staff, entwined with the serpent, and be healed. Simply by daring to look up at the serpent pole, the mortally wounded beings were granted renewed life.

Jesus was lifted up on the cross for the world that God loves, a world to be redeemed, not condemned. Simply by daring to look up at the cross, in belief, in confidence, in trust, those whose deeds are done in God, the mortal beings are granted renewed life, eternal life. Look up to the crucified and risen Christ.

For John the good news is that we too, snakebitten by a world that is too often cruel and violent, may find new light and life. To know that Christ is there is to know that there is hope.ⁱⁱⁱ

Our hope in Christ comes from looking up at the cross with a thirst for the living water that only God can quench.

In an article by Christian writer Cortney Whiting, she writes of five signs of spiritual dehydration:^{iv} grumbling, fatigue, anger, lack of self-control and making unwise choices. She elaborates on each of these and she also compares them to the signs of physical dehydration. As I read through her words, I connected them to our angry, wandering, complaining Israelite faith ancestors. As they slid back into their old scarcity mindset, they thirsted for the relationship with the God they were letting go of. It would take the lifting up of a bronze serpent on a pole to quench their thirst, to call them to see that God had been there all along with and for them.

Nicodemus also knew spiritual dehydration, and in his thirst he had sought out this new teacher and his strange teachings. Nicodemus had questioned Jesus, grumbling about unexpected concepts, fatigued by his daily life reputation and risky nighttime seeking, angered by his fear of being discovered by other Pharisees who would no doubt accuse him of a lack of self-control and making unwise choices.

Yet to Nicodemus, Jesus compared himself to the healing serpent Moses had lifted up, as one day on the cross, Jesus would offer healing to the world.

We are four weeks into our Lenten journey. We have traveled far, yet still have far to go. Are you thirsty from our long wilderness walk? Are there times you find yourself grumbling, tired, annoyed, distracted and tuned out under the expectations in this season of reflection and repentance?

Jesus' invitation for Nicodemus is for us too. The cross that kills will also bring life. Eternal life is found in the Son of Man lifted up on a cross. Our hope in Christ comes from looking up at the cross with a thirst for the living water that only God can quench. Drink deeply. Amen.

ⁱ Cameron Howard: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-numbers-214-9-3>

ⁱⁱ Chrissy Cataldo: <http://www.wccucc.org/sermon-blog/our-sermon-for-march-11th-2018-to-be-lifted-numbers-214-9-and-john-314-21>

ⁱⁱⁱ E. Carrington Heath: <https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/march-10-lent-4b-numbers-21-4-9-john-3-14-21>

^{iv} <https://www.ibelieve.com/health-beauty/5-ways-to-tell-if-you-are-spiritually-dehydrated.html>