

Don't just know. Believe.

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Canady III

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http://lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Lent/BLent4_RCL.html

I want to start today with a bit of a confession. It's Lent, so it's a good time for that, and here's mine: I hate snakes. I mean, I really, really, really... really don't like them. A parishioner recently posted a picture of a snake on Facebook, asking all his friends to help him identify it. My only response was KILL IT. KILL IT DEAD!! You can tell me all day long about how those things are helpful at keeping rodents under control or some other way that they contribute to the ecosystem and that they are God's beloved creature. I don't care. I don't like them.

So imagine my "joy" when I looked at the scripture readings for today and discovered that the Hebrew Bible reading is one of the few incidents in Moses' life that Jesus cites as part of his own mission and ministry. In fact, it's one of the only episodes that is not related to a prophecy that Jesus specifically mentions. And we get to hear both of them today. Great. And as I prayerfully pondered what the Holy Spirit wanted the people of God to hear from these texts on this occasion, I couldn't ignore this part about... the snakes.

This scene in the 21st chapter of the book of Numbers is the third and (it should be noted) final time the Israelites complain against God and Moses. Each time they complain, there is a response from God and Moses. The pattern is that God seems to say, "You think *this* is bad? Try *that*!" Then the people apologize to God for complaining, and God tells Moses how to remedy the situation.

This time around, not only are the people complaining about the food and water, but there's not enough of it. It can be, and should be, very troubling to us that the writer of the Book of Numbers says that God sent the poisonous snakes and they bit and killed many people. First of all, it's widely understood that God led the people on the longest route possible from Egypt to the Promised Land to help cull out the oldest of the generation that left Egypt. The passage we hear today also comes on the cusp of many Israelites being taken captive in a battle with some Canaanites and Israel getting revenge in the battle. And they gave God the credit and the glory for their victory! But then, how soon they forget, the grumbling begins again. By the way, they are near the end of the journey here. This is many, many years after the Exodus, so they are nearing the Promised Land. So if a few more who longed for slavery and not freedom moved from this life to the next would have helped prepare them for entry into the the Land of Cana. So, these pests are biting people, causing them to suffer and die. The people repent, say the food actually **is** both plentiful and delicious, and Moses asks God for

some relief. And God provides the remedy for the situation. Under God's direction, Moses fashions a bronze (or copper) snake on a stick or a pole, and if people got bit, they could look at this thing and be cured. Ok, so this story doesn't get any less troublesome or weird, does it? And then add in that we just heard in the Hebrew Scripture readings last week an explicit injunction against graven images:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.¹

Moses didn't set this up as an image of God or to replace God, but later in Israelite history it would be seen that way. This metal artifact lasted until the reign of King Hezekiah of Judah. Hezekiah was a great reformer among the kings of Israel and Judah. In fact, he's the first king who is compared to King David as having done what was pleasing before the Lord. His reign was about 250 years after David. And one of the things he did was smash this snake on a stick into dozens of pieces because the people had been worshipping it instead of God.²

And you could say that looking at a metal carving a serpent to cure you from a snake bite isn't really worshipping an idol. Moses didn't treat it that way. God is the one who directed Moses to do it, and it certainly seemed to cure the snake bites (though it didn't get rid of the snakes!). What makes this story so phenomenal is that, according to one ancient source, this was a remedy that people would have remembered from Egypt. The Pharaoh had an image of a snake on his headdress that was believed to both ward off evil and had the ability to heal if it was gazed upon. The Egyptians put similar statues in other places and there are ancient documents that attest to miraculous healings. So in God's attempt to meet the people where they are, understanding their weakness, gives them the healing they so desire. How it worked? I got nothing... Rabbinic interpreters, particularly those in the middle ages, were disturbed by the magical nature of this cure and suggested that it was a glance towards God that cured them, not the bronze snake itself.³ Either way, it is attested both in Scripture and in non-Scripture sources that **something** worked.

Is it possible that it worked, that healing of both body and mind happened because the people believed that it would? They didn't just *want* it to work, but they firmly believed that it would work, they believed because God told Moses and Moses told the people "this is the path to healing and wholeness." While the serpents didn't go away like they'd asked, God provided healing. God provided an answer. God provided.

¹ Exodus 20

² Second Kings 18

³ *Jewish Study Bible* p. 326

This is clearly not the last time in human history that people have rebelled and complained against God or God has heard the cries of the oppressed. But human history is filled with stories of God responding to those cries with hope and healing and freedom in all of its many forms.

Is it possible that in the 3rd Chapter of John's Gospel when the Pharisee Nicodemus visits Jesus and wants to know more about him, Jesus just wants him to believe. Nicodemus says earlier in this scene, "How are these things possible?" Jesus takes a jab at him. "What? You're a teacher Israel and you don't know these things?" Knowing isn't enough, Jesus is saying to him. God has done amazing things in the past, like telling Moses to put a serpent on a stick, and people believed it would work. Why can't you believe that the Word made flesh, dwelling among you, is the path to a new kind of freedom and deliverance?

The Israelites didn't ask "so how does this snake-on-a-stick healing work?" They believed, and it did. Nicodemus needed facts and figures and hard proof. His need and want was hardly new to humanity, and has certainly not dissipated in the past 2,000 years. We are quick to believe what's easy to believe, what feels good to believe, what fits with our world view and to cast aside anything contrary to that. But God doesn't call us to that line of thinking. God wants us to see and believe, and believe in seeing, the miraculous. Big miracles like the disappearance of a disease or a snakebite and little miracles like the kid who conquers what they couldn't do last week. The unbelievable. The things that only God can make happen.

This passage from John's Gospel lands on the fourth Sunday of Lent because it's an early prediction of Jesus' death on the cross, and we are merely two weeks away from Palm Sunday. It fits perfectly into the narrative of Lent, and we hear this passage along with the passage from Numbers every three years. But Jesus' prediction of his death and our opportunity for eternal life isn't the only story, and we cheat ourselves if we think this scene is only about that. It's a story about knowing that God is at work in ways we can't even understand whether it's a bronze serpent that heals or a Messiah who ends up crucified. And believing allows us to see and to tell others what we have seen.

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