

A SNAKE THAT WILL BITE YOU

Sermon preached by K.C. Ptomey, Jr.

Scripture: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 22, 2009

When's the last time you heard a really good sermon from the book of Numbers? Well, when's the last time you heard a bad sermon, or any kind of sermon, based on a text from the book of Numbers?^[1] I've checked my files and discovered I have preached on Numbers only twice in over forty-one years in the pulpit and both times the sermon bombed. Perhaps foolishly, I've decided to try to preach on it this morning because a reading from Numbers appears only once in the three year lectionary cycle and because this is such a difficult text and because it is referenced by Jesus in today's reading from John's Gospel. This sermon too may bomb. But if it does, think about it this way, I'm only the *temporary* preacher around here. Jon will be back on Easter Sunday and I'll be gone!

The story has it that God has been leading the children of Israel through the wilderness. God frees them from four hundred years of captivity in Egypt; parts the waters of the Red Sea, so that they might escape the Egyptian army; leads them by a cloud in the daytime and a pillar of fire at night; and gives them manna from heaven when they are hungry and water from a rock when they are thirsty. The passage from Numbers for the morning tells us what they do in return. They whine!

Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no ... water, and we detest this miserable food.^[2]

It's just like the human beast, isn't it? God's given them plenty of manna. It's not that there is *no* food. It's that they don't like what's on the menu. "We detest this miserable food." So, the story goes, God sends snakes, lots of snakes, which bite the people. Many of them die. But Moses, at God's instruction, fashions a bronze serpent and places it on a pole. All who look upon that bronze serpent are spared.

This is not a story any of us learned in First Grade Sunday School. It sounds more like magic than religion. It makes you wonder why God didn't propose a better image to lift up on that pole. Why not an eagle reminding us of wonderful promise, "God will bear you up on eagles' wings...."? Why not a mountain, the symbol of the meeting place where God gave Moses the commandments? Why not a lamb, reminiscent of the lambs of Egypt which were slain and whose blood was placed on the door posts of the Israelites to protect them from the angel of death?^[3] Why a serpent?

^[1] Carol Bechtel Reynolds, "Life After Grace," **Interpretation**, (July 1997), p. 267.

^[2] Numbers 21:5b, (NRSV.)

^[3] Thanks to Steve Hancock of Second Presbyterian Church, Little Rock, Ak, who suggested these alternative symbols.

The ancient rabbis were at least as uneasy with this story as we are. And so they declared that it is not the snake but rather what looking at the raised snake causes us to do that is of the essence. “Whenever Israel looked upward,” the rabbis wrote, “and submitted their hearts to their Father in heaven, they were healed.” The one who turns toward the bronze serpent, who gazes upon it, is saved, not by the thing that is beheld, but by God, who is the savior of all.^[4]

The rabbis give a theological interpretation. The people’s complaint about the food is an indication of their lack of faith in God’s provision. They are sure there is decent food in Egypt. They would rather go back to this secure provision of food rather than risk their future on God’s faithfulness. If you will allow yourself to read the story theologically, not literally or historically but theologically, you are able to hear the storyteller’s point: Failure to trust God is deathly, as deathly as poisonous snakes.

I think this or a similar understanding is what prompted John to embed the strange snake story in the familiar tale of the Pharisee, Nicodemus. Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man will be lifted up....”^[5]

I need to say, parenthetically, that we Christians have misunderstood the Pharisees. We have caricatured them as self-righteous legalists, when in fact they were a party of reformers within Judaism that sought to center their religion in the Torah, the teachings of God as contained in the first five books of the Bible.^[6] They sincerely sought to know and to follow God’s will. They were committed to fulfilling, in as far as possible, every single one of God’s laws, including tithing. (Any Christian church would benefit from having more Pharisees among us!)

Pharisees were good, conscientious people. The temptation that sincerely religious people face, people who truly seek to know and do God’s will, is to trust in our own piety, our own good deeds, our own faithfulness, rather than in God.

The story is told of a man who died and went to heaven. Of course, St. Peter was there to meet him at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter said, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done; and I give you a certain number of points for each item. When you reach 100 points, you get in."

"Okay," the man says, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years, and never cheated on her, even in my heart." "That's wonderful," says St. Peter, "That's worth three points!"

^[4] Patrick Willson, “Snake On A Stick,” **Christian Century**, (March 2, 1994), p.223.

^[5] John 3:14.

^[6] Gregory Baum, “The Ambiguity of Biblical Religion,” **Theology Today**, (January 1977), p. 349.

"Three points?" he says. "Well, I attended church all my life, and supported its ministry with my tithe and service." "Terrific!" says St. Peter. "That's certainly worth a point."

"I was baptized!" "One more point."

"One point??!! I started a soup kitchen in my city, and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans." "Fantastic, that's good for two more points," he says.

"I even went on a short-term mission trip, and continued to support that ministry for the rest of my life on Earth." "You're getting better," said Peter, "That's worth another two points."

"Two points??!!" Exasperated, the man cries, "At this rate the only way I'll get into heaven is by the Grace of God."

"That's 100 points! Come on in!"

The challenge for the Israelites in the wilderness was to trust the grace of God. The temptation was to rely upon what they could do: turn back to Egypt. The challenge for Nicodemus was to trust God, to find his security not in his own pious, obedient life, but in God.

Trusting in self is a serpent that will bite you. It's deadly.

I have a good Presbyterian friend, who was reared in an extremely conservative, strict denomination. When he became a Presbyterian, his father was greatly concerned. He even said to my friend, "I'm sorry that you're not going to be in heaven with the rest of us."

His father was a good man. He was a faithful church goer. He prayed, and he studied his Bible. He had been "born again." He was an elder. He counted on his good life and his faithfulness and his loyalty to the church and his generosity. The irony is that when he came to the end of his life, he was deeply fearful because, as he admitted to family members, he wasn't sure that he had done enough.

That snake will bite you.

In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus says something that has disturbed many Christians for years.

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.^[7]

^[7] John 3:18, (NR SV.)

This text, as one Biblical scholar puts it, teaches that “condemnation does not simply wait out in the future to punish those who have turned their backs on God; it exists in the present...^[8] “Condemned already.”

There is a sense in which my friend’s father was “condemned already,” condemned to uncertainty and fear, because he did not trust his life and his future to God; condemned already, even as the children of Israel were condemned to fear, because they did not trust their future to God.

You can never be certain that you have done enough. In fact, you can be absolutely certain that you have not done enough! That’s why you must be “born from above.” It’s about grace. It’s not about what *we* must do, but what *God* has done. The cross of Jesus Christ is a symbol of what God has done, and that it is enough.

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^[8] Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year B*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 229.