

## Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

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March 22, 2009

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

Numbers 21:4-9

<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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." <sup>6</sup>Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>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." <sup>9</sup>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

<sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>"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.

<sup>17</sup>"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. <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup>For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup>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."

### **The Lift. The Look. The Life.**

**Here is this strange old story from the book of Numbers. It is one of those stories that would probably be lost or glossed over were it not for Jesus' reference to it in his conversation with Nicodemus, that night visitor of John's Gospel. There are some deep and spiritual things that Jesus offers Nicodemus. Indeed I must say that the Gospel of John is the most**

intense to comprehend as there is so much at play. Only John calls to mind this old story from the book of Numbers.

John places this story early on in the Gospel as almost a foreshadowing of that which is to come where we see a developing theology of the cross. Through John, we are shown a Jesus who sees this story as an overlay onto his life—the life of the Messiah, and what will, and must happen with him.

Jesus says, “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.”

The function of the story is it becomes the backdrop to crucifixion and all that it means. Do you remember being in a drama in high school or even in middle school? Do you remember doing a stage production? I remember long ago seeing a theater production from one of those low budget theaters. You know, it is the type of theater where they pull audience members to read a number of the parts – it was a good time. As I recall it the only set was the backdrop. There were a number of backdrops. The scene was set and changed by the backdrop that was on display. There was one of mountains that looked like the mountains and hills of Austria in the “Sound of Music.” There was another that had the skyscrapers on it that appeared to be a city at night.

By changing the backdrop, the tone for the scene was set.

This story in the book of Numbers functions as a backdrop to how crucifixion will play out. As the story functions, it works in such a way that it’s role is to serve both as a source of memory and power, and also as a glimpse or sign of how the future will come about.

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Here they are in the desert. And in the language of the old King James Version the people were murmuring. Oh, that is a great old word—murmuring. It's like a din of constant complaint. You know how we can so easily fall into that. Where murmur, murmur, murmur and before you know it we have this attitude on. Been there done that. And then along comes that pack/gang mentality to murmuring where it becomes almost a sing-songy chorus. Grumble, grumble, complain, complain, bumble, bumble, blah, blah, blah. Not happy.

If we read this story in the Torah—we discover in today's passage the fifth of the murmuring stories of Israel in the wilderness. And do understand that this is a harsh place. This is no 3 star accommodations. It is a place of hostility. When we read about the desert in the history of the Israelites, we should be really reading that as the under-text. That for sure, for sure, this was a place of harshness, that this was a truly dangerous and difficult place to be.

That was their situation—they were headed toward the Promised Land via about 40 years of delay. Along the way things are truly difficult. The manna that first tasted like bread fresh from Grandma's oven, well it was now as has been as you can get. Old hat; it landed in their mouths like the cheapest bought boring white bread that you could find.

Not only the diet, but the water source was scarce. And enough quail already. How about a slice of ham—no, that would not work. How about a slab of roast beef! They were tired of all this miserable stuff. They were tired and thirsty, and oh so incredibly done with this entire scene.

And so they began to remember with fondness the good old days in Egypt. Life there maybe was not so bad after all. Bricks without straw, sure, but oh for the fleshpots of Egypt where they had their fill. They started to re-write their own history. They grumbled, mumbled, murmured. They complained.

**They complained some more. They murmured some more.**

**Nothing was right—nothing was worth looking up to or even looking forward to. Nothing. Woe is me! It was so bad that they could just as well be dead. There was nothing worth living for out there in that miserable old desert. Yuck! Hate it! They could just as well be dead.**

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**Along came these serpents. Fiery serpents that bit them, and then when they were bitten the bites lead to death. It is at that point when there is legitimate threat to their personhood that they come in a state of repentance to Moses. They ask Moses to intervene for them with the Lord.**

**So Moses does just that. He prays to the Lord about the situation with the poisonous serpents. And the Lord tells Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and raise it up on a pole, and the Lord tells Moses that everyone who is bitten who looks upon the serpent of the bronze will live.**

**Moses casts the serpent. Moses raises it up on a standard. And everyone who is bitten, when they look at that serpent on that pole—they live.**

**A great story. A powerfully redemptive God who brings to bear our reality.**

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**It is how the story functions in the larger narrative that we cannot miss. When I talk about the larger narrative—I'll call it our meta-narrative. Each of us and all of us together have a meta-narrative. Our meta-narrative is that story, that backdrop, that scene that sets the stage for how we understand our lives.**

**This story of the bronze serpent is for Israel, and even more so for us as followers of Christ, part of that incredible meta-narrative that forms the backdrop for how we see and interpret the world and each of our own lives. We would do well to understand why it functions as such.**

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**It is part of the meta-narrative of Israel and for us in the regard that it triggers or fires the memory. It triggers or fires or makes the memory come alive.**

**What was the problem of the people of Israel out there in the wilderness in that desert of their existence? What was the problem? Was the problem that really miserable food? Was the problem really the lack of fresh water sources that were sufficient for all the people? Was the problem really that life was better back in Egypt where they had three squares a day and hard labor?**

**Was that the problem, that it was really better back then? It is the “Go Back to Egypt Committee.” Every institution and every church too has a “Go Back to Egypt Committee.” Especially when change starts to feel personal. I could say much about that, but I also want us to realize that in each of us there is that “Go Back to Egypt Committee” of our lives where we remember it better than it really was. There is that piece and part of us that remembers those glory days when we had it all put together, but in reality that never existed—but we want to remember it that way.**

**That was the issue. Their memory. They were not remembering. All their memories and those of the “Go Back to Egypt Committee,” were about THEM. They were not remembering God.**

**They were not remembering correctly or even truthfully. They were not remembering that it was God who delivered them. They were not remembering that it was God who not only delivered them from slavery,**

**but it was God who had made a sure and strong covenant with them, and that very Creating, Redeeming, Sustaining God was delivering them to the Land of the Promise.**

**God was their source of life. God delivered them. God made covenant with them. God gave them bread in the morning and quails at night. Even when it was no longer to their liking—it was nonetheless not their own doing that filled their bellies, but it was by the very hand of God that they were not hungry at night. God was their source.**

**The poisonous serpents helped to re-direct their corporate memory. From grumble murmur to remember that God is at hand. From complain to remember that God is the one who is in covenant relationship with them.**

**Do you see it? It is the problem in each of our lives. It is the problem in our lives together. It is the problem. They are so much like us, and we are so much like them. We forget. We forget God as soon as we forget anything. We forget God as fast as we forget what breakfast tasted like.**

**We are called to remember—that is the shape and structure of what it means to worship and live the spiritual life—it is a Sabbath: remember God's claim in your life. Remember God's claim in our lives.**

**To remember...yes, to remember!**

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**It is part of the meta-narrative of Israel and us in that it is a sure sign of where the power is located. Get that—this is a sure sign of where the power is located.**

**This is not a story about magic. There is no such thing as magic. The only thing that is real is God. Chew on that a bit in your life. The only**

**thing that is real is God. The bronze serpent that Moses lifted up on the standard was not some sort of magical figure – it was God.**

**Hear that: it was God. Not that it was a representation of God. No. This was not an image of God. It was rather a calling card—it was a trigger, a flash, a zap, a jolt to draw one into the reality of who had the power. God did.**

**Where did the serpents come from? It's real clear. God. Who had the power to keep ones alive who had been bitten? God did. It is lifted up. You look. You live. Because of what you did? No, because of God.**

**Who had the power? God did. And God does.**

**Why did they live when they looked at the bronze serpent? Why did they live? Did they live because of the actual looking? No, they lived because God gave the life. They lived because God had and has the power to make them live.**

**God made the difference right then and there in their lives. There was not a thing they could do to save themselves from the desperateness of their situation there in the desert. There was not a thing they could do. The snake bites and you die. That was reality.**

**The only one who could do something about it was God.**

**That is our story! There is not a thing we can do to change our story. There is not a thing we can do in order to make it better or rescue us from the struggle of living. There is not a thing we can do to save ourselves from dying, or worse yet from living in these days—there is not a thing we can do.**

**Not us—but God. It is God who does it. It is God who saves. It is God that makes the difference right now for us right here in middle of the**

**desert where the poisonous snakes are biting at our lives. Right here and right now God is making the difference in our lives.**

**That fact becomes that meta-narrative—it becomes the backdrop of all our living. It becomes our story. It is where the action is at. That God is the ONE who makes a difference in our living or succumbing to the serpents. It is the power of God alive and well in our living right now.**

**God is always making the initiative towards us. God is the ONE. God is the ONE who is moving towards us with life—always that is the source of power and life.**

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**Yes, it is part of the meta-narrative of Israel and of us—in that it is a sure sign of the shape of the future. It is a sure sign of the shape of the future. There is always an eschatology to every now moment. There is always an eschatology to every now moment.**

**For sure—they could trust their future. They could have confidence in God's care and love for them. God had delivered them, oh Israel. Did you think that God would deliver you and abandon you in the wilderness? Never. Not God's way. Such is not the way of the Holy God who creates in love.**

**God had delivered them, and God has saved them from the poison of the serpent too. And God surely will be with them forever. God will remember them in the future. Each step of the journey and along the whole way God will always remember them.**

**Do you get it? That is our story—that is the fact, and that is our meta-narrative that we can rely on and bet it all on. Cash it in, this is where it is all at. The serpent in the wilderness for the Israelites, and Jesus on the cross—it is the same story. It is our story.**

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**It is the story of the God who remembers us, even and especially in and at that moment when we don't think ourselves worthy of being remembered. Oh, right then and there God continues to lay a claim on us and move mightily in our lives.**

**We need to see that such is the shape of our future. Look up. Lift up your eyes. Behold. See it. God was going to be with them as they moved in to possess the Promised Land.**

**God is with you. God is remembering you not merely as memory—but as promise. God is creating for you and in you a future where life cannot be stopped. God is creating for you and in you a future where even death has no finality but where life continues to be growing, new, creating, reaching, real---that future is even now. And of such love we dare to remember.**

**We dare to remember and we dare to see that just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so to was the Son of Man lifted up—and in his being lifted up there was not an end—there was instead reality of life that draws us all into this God who loves us ever still forevermore. Amen.**