

March 16, 2014
First Presbyterian Church (EPC), Bentleyville, Pa.
Numbers 21:4-9
“Snake on a Pole”
Rev. Andrew Scott, Pastor

I have kids. And *because* I have kids, I don’t dare leave home without adequate provisions, no matter how short the trip, no matter how grand the feast that awaits us at our destination. I pack *sandwiches* and *juice boxes* to go to the *post office*. Which I could hit from my front porch with a *baseball*. On a regular basis, my kids ask what there is to eat before we leave the *driveway*.

Which is to say that I admire the patience of Moses, and of the Lord, throughout Israel’s wanderings in the wilderness. Because you don’t turn two pages in the book of Numbers without reading about the Israelites complaining about food, or water, or both.

In the 21st chapter, it’s about food. In verse four, we’re told that the people of Israel set out once again, this time to go around the land of Edom, by way of the Red Sea. The people, it says, “became impatient on the way.” The Hebrew literally says that their spirits were dragged down *because* of the way. In other words, they had been poised at the edge of the promised land, but in order to avoid the hostile country of Edom, the Lord had them backtrack a little way to go around. And they got indignant.

For about the four hundred and sixty-third time – not literally, but it seems that way – the people “spoke against God and against Moses” – verse 5. Their complaint was a familiar one: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food, or water, and we loathe this worthless food.”

Did you catch that? It’s the complaint of a petulant seven-year-old: “There’s no food... and we hate this awful food.” I don’t have anything to eat, and I won’t eat what you give me. Pretty much the same thing you hear from a teenaged girl when she says that she has nothing to wear, and that all of her clothes are horrible.

Mind you, the same people complaining about water are the people who demanded water about ten verses earlier in chapter 20. And they got it – as much as they could drink. As for food, they’d been fed miraculously by the Lord for thirty-nine years. Every morning there was manna on the ground. Every day there were quail blown into the camp. The problem wasn’t that they had nothing to eat or drink. It was that they didn’t *like* what they had.

So God, having been challenged again and again, did something fairly drastic: he sent snakes. Poisonous snakes. Into the camp. They bit people, and people died.

As to *why*, there are a couple of possibilities. One is that the snakes represented Egypt, and the old Egyptian gods. That was definitely the case in Exodus chapter 7. Moses threw down his rod and it transformed into a snake; the Egyptian magicians did the same, and Moses' snake ate their snakes. In that case, it was a visible depiction of the supremacy of the Lord over the gods of Egypt. And that's possible here: remember that the people's complaint was that they wanted to go back to Egypt.

But the closest parallel is to the third chapter of Genesis, to the serpent who beguiled Eve into sampling the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and then encouraging her husband to do the same.

Now, this is hard for us to accept: why would God, who the New Testament declares to be love, send *poisonous snakes* among his own people? To understand the answer, we have to understand what's at stake here. The rebellion against the Lord endangered *all* of Israel. Without his guidance, his provision, his care, they were just another bunch of nomads wandering around in the desert. And that didn't leave them with much of a chance.

What the Lord did by sending these poisonous snakes among his people was to make visible – to portray before their eyes – their invisible, spiritual state: that they had been *infected* by the poisonous lies of the deceiver, of that ancient serpent, the Devil, and as a result, had come to doubt the goodness and the providence of God. And they were perishing.

The people got it, incidentally. According to verse seven, they came to Moses, as God's representative, and confessed: "We have sinned," they said, "against the Lord, and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us."

Then comes the strange bit: God relents, and commands Moses to make a "fiery serpent" and to set it on a flagpole, and he promised that everyone, bitten by one of these snakes, who looked upon it, would live. (v.8)

So, what's that about? A bronze snake on a pole? That's supposed to solve everything? Well, yes: the snake on the pole served at least three purposes. On the one hand, it was a sign of God's judgment. For the Israelites to look at the snake was to look at their own sin. The word translated here as "pole" actually meant something more like a battle standard. In other words, the Lord was forcing them to recognize that they hadn't

been marching under his standard all along, but in their rebellion had been following the orders of that ancient serpent, the Devil. It was a kind of forced acknowledgment of sin.

At the same time, the brazen serpent was a sign of God's victory, in the same way that an enemy's head on a pike might have been – as if to say, “I have victory over the serpent, and consequently, over these serpents.”

And there's a third meaning folded in here: the snake on the pole was a symbol of God's *grace*. It brought healing and life. It may have seemed a silly thing: I mean, who seriously thinks that looking at a bronze statue of a snake is going to cure you? But at the same time, who – humanly speaking – thinks that an ancient instrument of torture (the cross) is somehow going to grant eternal life? It's a free gift, beyond the bounds of human reason, beyond justice, beyond reason: it works *only* because of love. The love of God.

And that's where this whole business collides, fairly head-on, with the Gospel. You probably know that Jesus himself said that Moses and all the prophets spoke of him. (Luke 24:27) On at least two occasions – in the third chapter of John, and again in the twelfth chapter of John – Jesus referred to this particular incident, by way of explaining his own work. Speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus said that “as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...” (John 3:14) And again, speaking privately to his disciples, Jesus said “and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (John 12:32)

What does he mean by that? It's pretty simple, really: on the one hand, like the snake on the pole, Jesus on the cross is a symbol and a sign of *judgment*. The Israelites in the wilderness rejected their true king, the Lord. Likewise, in sin, all humanity – every last one of us – rejected our true king. A fair portion of the Israelites died for their sin. But Jesus Christ willingly laid down his life in our place. We rejected him. He came into the world as its Light (John 1:9), its manna, its bread from heaven (John 6:35), its water springing up to eternal life (John 4:14), and its life (John 11:25). What did we do? We stood outside the palace, baying “crucify him! We have no king but Caesar!” (John 19:15) If that's true, who are we to complain about God's justice? Our indictment is right there on that cross. We, sinners, sinned away; Jesus Christ, the righteous Son of God, obeyed, and laid down his life.

At the same time, like the snake on the pole, the cross is a sign of *victory* and *grace*. Jesus died, yes, but death and hell had no hold on the one who had done no wrong, who had committed no sin, who had been faithful to his Father to the end. In his

death, Jesus conquered hell, and rose for *us*, that we – sinners though we are, infected by the bite of the Devil – might rise with *him*.

Through Christ's obedience, through his death on the cross, and his resurrection to life, justice is satisfied, and grace poured out. *That* is the sign of the snake. That is the Gospel. Praise God. Amen.