

CONSTRUING THE CROSS: THE SERPENT

Numbers 21:5-9

John 3:11-15

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 7, 2019, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, as the final sermon in a Lenten series entitled "Construing the Cross."

Numbers 21:5-9

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 3:11-15

'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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.'

Prayer: Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I.

Each of you is to be applauded for coming *to* – and at least staying thus far *in* – a worship service whose sermon has in its title the word "Serpent." The serpent is not the most inviting of creatures.

- In the story of Creation, the *serpent* appears as the one creature congenitally disposed to disobey God, twisting the truth and leading the man and the woman to exceed the limits God had set upon them and thus initiate what we call in Christian theology the Fall, from which God has been about the business of redeeming us ever since.¹
- When as part of that effort of redemption, the people of Israel complain on the one hand about the *scarcity* of food in the wilderness into which they had just been freed from slavery, and on the other hand about the *quality* of the food provided – a seeming contradiction, though I suppose no one ever said complaining has to be consistent or coherent – God responds with a plague of *serpents* that takes the lives of many of the complainers.
- Later, in the New Testament, Jesus reserves some of his harshest language for Pharisees, whom he calls a "brood of vipers,"² a brood of venomous *serpents*.

¹ Genesis 3:1-24.

² Matthew 12:34.

Yet the rap serpents receive is not always disreputable.

- Jesus advises his disciples to be “innocent as doves” and “wise as *serpents*.”³
- In various cultures and religions, *serpents* are symbols for fertility and rebirth, guardianship of temples and sacred places, and medicinal healing.
- In fact, the staff of the Greek physician Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing, is a symbol of modern medicine – a staff with a *serpent* wrapped around it.⁴

The serpent is the final of five symbols we have been considering in sermons during Lent each of which has been associated with the cross of Christ: These have included sacrifice, scapegoating, deliverance, tree, and now serpent.⁵

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As in history and mythology, the association of serpents with the cross is a mixed bag.

It is drawn from a story in the Old Testament Book of Numbers we read earlier.

- God has led the people of Israel out of slavery yet into the wilderness.
- The people complain about not having enough food *and* about the less than gourmet quality of the food they have.
- God responds by sending deadly serpents who bite Israelites and lead many of them to die – not the most worship-worthy moment we see of God, but also not out of character for the human way God is often portrayed in the Bible.
- In desperation, the people turn to their leader Moses, who prays on their behalf.
- God relents, and instructs Moses to place a *serpent of bronze* high atop a pole, lifted up in the midst of the community, and calls those who have been bitten to turn and look at the serpent of bronze – much as we might salute a flag being raised on a flagpole in front of an elementary school. By looking at the bronze serpent, God promises, those bitten will be healed. And so they are.

In the New Testament, Jesus draws on this strange and macabre story in speaking with his disciples of his own impending fate. He says:

*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.*⁶

Just as in the Old Testament turning and *looking at* the serpent atop the pole provides *life* for the Israelites, so also in the New Testament turning and *believing* in the “*lifted-up-ness*” of Christ – crucified, risen, ascended – provides *life* for all those who believe, life which begins here and now on earth and continues after our death.⁷

³ Matthew 10:16.

⁴ Frances M. Young, *Construing the Cross* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015), 87.

⁵ The series grows out of the book by Young cited above.

⁶ The association between “lifted up” and glory occurs as well in 8:28; 12:32-34; and 13:1-3.

⁷ In the Gospel of John, as Raymond E. Brown has pointed out, “glory” refers to the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ; “lifted up” refers to his being lifted up on the cross, in the resurrection, and at the ascension; and “life” describes what we receive from him that begins in our earthly lives and continues into eternity. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John; (i-xii)* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 503-505, 517-518.

Hence, the final association in this sermon series by which we construe the cross is an association of *healing, life, salvation*: Christ *lifted up* on a cross//the bronze serpent *lifted up* on a pole.

II.

But to focus simply on the cross as healing can obscure a truth that is an important element of the healing to which the cross points. The additional truth is this: When in the wilderness the Israelites are told to *look at* the snake, they are being told to look at that which is specifically and particularly *threatening* to them as individuals and as a community. They are told to *look at* that which has taken the lives of their family members and friends, to look at that which has infected all they know and cherish.

- In other words, they are to turn and face the source of their fear and anxiety, to face the source of their grievance, to face whatever contribution they have made to their condition – whatever sin they have born, mistake they have made – and to face their fundamental lack of trust that God will provide for them in the wilderness.
- In turning to face the *source* of their situation, they must do what is hard for all of us to do: look honestly at that which we have *done* or that which we have been *done to us*. Likewise, in turning our gaze to Christ, lifted up on the cross, we turn to face what may be blocking us from recognizing and accepting the gifts God has offered us and therefore becoming more fully the redeemed human being Christ has led us to be.

There is indeed *beauty* in the idea that the cross of Christ is a place to which we can turn for the *healing* of the deepest and most personal wounds with which serpents have infected our bodies, our minds, our souls, our relationships, our work, our family, our nation and world. But there is also something *profound* in the idea that God calls us to bear responsibility for having the courage to *face* these serpents, even and especially when they reside within us. In turning to Christ for healing, we must *face* the source of the disease. “*Everyone who is bitten shall look at it and be healed.*”

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This is not an easy gaze to acquire, not an easy act of looking to practice and cultivate.

One of the spirituals we have not sung this Lent describes the loneliness of what Jesus faced, the loneliness of what we may face in looking at the bronze serpent, in looking at the source of our poison, even when that look promises healing:

*Jesus walked this lonesome valley,
He had to walk it by Himself;
O, nobody else could walk it for Him,
He had to walk it by Himself.*

*We must walk this lonesome valley,
We have to walk it by ourselves;
O, nobody else can walk it for us,
We have to walk it by ourselves.⁸*

⁸ “Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley,” American spiritual, composer unknown. Available at <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/j/e/s/u/jesuwalk.htm>.

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Looking at the bronze serpent is a highly personalized and individualized activity.

- Only we know what has bitten us.
- Only we know the source of poison running through our veins.
- We may not know every kind of snake that has bitten us, nor every time and place we have been bitten, but we know enough that if we are willing to take a hard look at the serpent, the extent and location of the poison will become even clearer.

In 1530, the great Biblical translator William Tyndale wrote of the Scripture he gave his life translating, that we are to “apply the medicine of the scripture, [each to our] own sores.”⁹ Looking at the bronze serpent, looking at the cross of Christ, is highly individualized, highly personalized. “Nobody can look at it for us...we have to look at it ourselves.”

While our looking is lonely and individual, look we must for healing. The last line of each of our passages reads respectively:

*...that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live....
... the Son of Man be lifted up,
That whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

The final word in each passage is “life.”

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Rilke described the artist as:

*A being with no shell, open to pain
Tormented by light, shaken by every sound.*¹⁰

But it is the vulnerability of the artist that leads the artist to create. “The person [who] looks at the serpent of bronze [will] live.”

Of the passage of the Bronze Serpent, biblical scholar Avivah Zornberg writes: *Conscious vulnerability is part of the movement into freedom.*¹¹

Good people of Westminster, when we look at the bronze serpent, when we look at the cross of Christ, we are “a being with no shell,” a person of “conscious vulnerability,” one who walks “that lonesome valley by ourselves.” But by looking, we become “*part of the movement into freedom*,” the movement into life, the movement into our eternity with the Holy One.

...look at the serpent of bronze – the cross of Christ – and live...

Amen.

⁹ William Tyndale; prefixed to the translation of the Pentateuch, 1530, quoted on frontispiece of Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976).

¹⁰ Quoted in Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015), 85.

¹¹ Zornberg 250.