

In the Wilderness | The Gospel in the Book of Numbers

“The Bronze Serpent (Looking at the Problem IS the Solution)”

Numbers 21.4-9; John 3.13-18; 2nd Corinthians 5.21

12.4.16

We’ve been working through the Book of Numbers, the fourth book of the Bible, and that means we’ve been traveling with the ancient Israelites as they journey toward the Promised Land after their Exodus from slavery in Egypt.

This should have been a fairly short trip but the 40 days turned into 40 years...AND the reason for this very long delay (in which the first generation died) the delay was due to a succession of revolts against Moses but really against God.

The SEVEN rebellions are arranged (as we showed in the bulletin today) they’re recorded so that all the emphasis falls on the fourth, the CENTRAL REVOLT i.e. their refusal to go into the land God promised them. And that revolt MOST CLEARLY demonstrates the root of all their rebellion, which was unbelief: they would not receive from God, would not rely/depend on Him... they preferred the illusion of control rather than trusting God and His good intentions and good promises for them.

AND that unbelieving root behind ALL the revolts... sometimes it appears in the disguise of fear ...sometimes as envy or anger (as we saw last week) but the middle revolt (#4) in CH 13 – that’s where unbelief STEPS OUT OF THE SHADOWS and takes center stage – “The LORD said to Moses, ‘How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me?’” (14.11)

Today, we come to the last rebellion... We hear the voice of the new generation; this is (I think) the last time they complain about the food... And this is the first time (I THINK) that they are repentant...

And in some strange but wonderful way... the problem IS ALSO THE SOLUTION – the seventh revolt, the mysterious remedy and how it still works today.

This is the mirror image of the first rebellion way back in CH 11 – they complain about the journey and here again they grumble about the route Moses is taking about the food and lack of water and once again they have sinister suspicions about God that they have been brought into the wilderness as some sort of perverse joke...that God wants to kill them and that Moses wants to join in.

It says in v. 4, “the people became SHORT IN SOUL...” some people think that means impatient but it can also mean discouraged (like they ran out of heart – lost heart...despaired). BUT again,

they USE their own dark emotions and their discouraging circumstances as the lens for understanding God. They DON'T look at the world through the grid or the memory of what God has done for them...nor from the perspective of faith in His promises.

They don't ask what their dark, impatient, discouraged hearts say about THEM... they project their feelings on to God.

And here we should point out again how common this IS. If we want to accumulate evidence that God is not good...we can find it...BUT the way we read or interpret that evidence...the way we make the data support our own fallen preconceptions and biases really tells more about US than it does about God.

And this is what we've seen from the start of this series... some people are made sweet by suffering – they become deep people and there's a wisdom and maturity about them and others become bitter and shallow and petulant like grumpy/spoiled babies.

And the X-factor is how people think about the character of God...do YOU trust that God is good and that His promises are dependable? Is the goodness of God the lens or is my own fickle, impatient heart the looking glass through which I read reality?

In this case the short-soul, impatience/discouragement and complaining of the people turns on the character of God and concludes, "God is NOT good!" and their inward simmering within is met with outward burning: God sends snakes ...called "fiery" because their bite caused burning on the skin.

And THIS time the people quickly face their own part in the revolt...they ask Moses to intercede for them and they say (something I THINK only Aaron has acknowledged to this point), "We have sinned".

And Moses is told to make a serpent out of bronze or probably (as Luther said) of copper (which is a red metal) and to hoist it up on a pole (which is to this day the symbol of medicine used in many parts of the world) and if anyone bitten by these deadly snakes even LOOKS at the copper snake on the pole that person will be spared...will live and not die.

It's short...only a few verses long (like the first revolt) and as I mentioned some weeks back, this passage is somewhat of an embarrassment to Torah scholars because it is apparently a case of sympathetic magic and the Torah totally rejects that...

So what's really IS going on here and is there some sort of hidden symbolism we should recognize?

Well, the serpent has appeared in the Bible already (and there will be other later appearances as well!) and two scenes come to mind.

The first is the Garden of Eden (remember the model of Eden, the Tabernacle goes with the Israelites wherever they go). In Eden the serpent asks, “Has God really said? Don’t you see that God is afraid of you...God is holding back the good stuff from you because He doesn’t want you to know what He knows?”

And...of course... that is always the role of the serpent ...the adversary, the accuser...slithering in and accusing.

And the serpent appears again in the confrontation between Moses and Aaron and the Pharaoh... The snake was a symbol for Egypt (think of the gold uraeus cobra on the Pharaoh’s headdress... King Tut’s death mask)... and when Moses threw down the staff it turned into a serpent and Moses was told to simply pick it up by the tail so that the symbol of Egypt’s sovereignty/power was immobilized – God is saying, “Egypt is in My hand” and then Aaron’s staff swallows the Egyptian snakes (Ex.7) sending a powerful message to Pharaoh.

And here in the wilderness as the people continue to pine for Egypt ... as the serpent from Eden continues to whisper, “Wouldn’t you be happier in Egypt where there’s onions and cucumbers...slavery wasn’t that bad...you lost a few boys when they threw them screaming into the Nile...but wasn’t it better than this?”

At this moment, God is saying, “You are really not marching under MY banner and not carrying MY coat of arms... you’re really following the serpent... and it’s time YOU FACE THAT...time you face YOURSELVES.”

And that might look really dark...for God to make them face themselves and take a hard look at their “short souls”... And it’s NOT that He’s rubbing their nose in it...but THEY DO HAVE TO SEE THIS ABOUT THEMSELVES – they have to look squarely their own sin and the root of it all: their refusal to trust God.

Look at the problem... THAT IS THE SOLUTION... it’s NOT that, in failing to trust God you’re trusting nothing... Your heart is always trusting in something...you are always looking to some source, some functional savior... Bob Dylan (the Nobel Laureate) was right, “You gotta serve somebody...It may be the devil or it may be the Lord...but you’re gonna have to serve somebody!”

But ...not only is this red-copper-snake on a pole a picture of their problem... it’s a vivid reminder that God is victorious over the serpent.

God makes sport of Egypt's power-symbol right there in the Pharaoh's court. "I hold the cobra by the tail...I do with it...and with Egypt... as I please."

He said so from the Garden of Eden when He announced to the deceptive serpent, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel." (Gen 3.15)

And then in time...in the fullness of time (Gal 4.4) ...He sent that Seed of the woman...Adversary to the adversary and one night a religious scholar named Nicodemus came to this Jesus of Nazareth – who BTW, had fulfilled Israel's mission by spending 40 days in the wilderness ("ba midbar") where He too met the whispering serpent and Jesus Christ didn't believe that lying voice... (Matt 4).

So, this Nicodemus came to Jesus and Nicodemus said, "Wow! You know a lot...I think you may almost have reached to OUR level of higher learning and spiritual heights...you've really moved UP IN THE WORLD."

And Jesus Christ said, "Oh...I haven't moved UP...I've only moved down...you see I came from heaven...but I WILL MOVE UP... I'll be lifted up... As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life..."

"I AM the reality to which that mysterious moment in the Wilderness Wanderings pointed... and the moment that will be My glory...My return to My Father (from whence I came) – the moment of My triumph will be when I am enthroned upon the awful Tree...I will be charged with the sins of all My people from all time... I will be made the symbol of the problem... I will be as it were, the world's guiltiest Man... and God the Father will give to ME what YOU deserve."

"God made HIM who knew no sin to BE sin on our behalf so that WE might become the righteousness of God in HIM." (2 Co 5.21)

The One who triumphed over the serpent in the wilderness for 40 days and who rejected His temptations in the Garden of Gethsemane... the True Israel...the delightful Son...the Perfect Adam...the One without sin...will become sin for us.

"The Law came through Moses but GRACE and truth was realized through Jesus Christ (Jn 1.17)... He is the Key to the Hebrew Scriptures... They all point to HIM (Luke 24.27-32, 44-45) He shows us a picture of what we are, of what our sin deserves...He shows what our humanity is capable of, that God came to us and we crucified Him. Look.

And to this very day...everyone who looks to Him... who fixes his/her eyes on the Man who became sin for us, everyone who trusts Him (everyone's trusting something!) but everyone who looks to Him will be cured from the snake-bite... the condemnation that awaits us.

See? We've all been bitten... we're all fallen...all doomed to die...the venom is even now circulating and soon...and very soon... each of us will die...NOT ONLY PHYSICALLY... but will stand before God and give an account of our lives.

But before that moment...YOU can...right now...you can look at this horrible, hideous sight...the Man who is blamed...who became a symbol of the problem... the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the WORLD.

And the moment you look to HIM... when you face your death sentence ...but before the venom takes YOU...if you simply trust Him...look to Him... transfer your confidence from YOURSELF to Him... "Whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting LIFE...God did NOT send His Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through Him might be saved."

If you are looking to Him...you'll begin to see life differently ...you'll see God differently...THE LENS changes your bias and you become convinced... the more you look the more you'll become convinced, "God is GOOD and His promises can be trusted...He did not bring me into the wilderness to harm me or condemn me but rather TO REMAKE ME to fulfill me and even the worst things will somehow work for my good."

The Snake on the Pole is a symbol of healing and the Man on the Tree is the reality to which the symbol points... and the prescription is still the same: LOOK to Him.

The Communion

12.4.16

Please read our short statement on p.14 about how to participate i.e. whether to take the bread and wine. We include that in the bulletin because St Paul wrote to the Corinthians that a person should NOT take the communion if he/she was not rightly discerning the Body, the Church... So we're passing the warning along....and I'm willing to talk about it after the service.

Our society has some problems with looking – for instance:

We're pretty much convinced in our society that we should avoid looking at dark and negative stuff in the world and in our lives and I GET IT...I get the way the 24 news cycle works and how events have to be rehashed and sensationalized and analyzed ad infinitum...

AND I get how often times the journey INWARD as we try to figure out WHY we do WHAT we do...I get how that can sometimes generate a kind of morbid introspection and just another form of self-obsession... (and I haven't even mentioned our society's voyeurism...looking at the hardships of others so we don't have to look at our own.)

HOWEVER...as we said last week...to know God you have to know yourself and to know yourself you have to know God.

It's only the Gospel that can really open this up to us. Unless you see that Jesus Christ really IS the remedy, that HE REALLY DID TAKE THE FALL FOR YOU AND THAT NOW YOU ARE GUILTLESS IN THE SIGHT OF GOD – that the Rightness of Jesus Christ has been attributed to YOU and God utterly delights in YOU... UNLESS YOU SEE THAT AND UNLESS YOU KEEP LOOKING AT HIM, you will never have the courage to really look at your STUFF...your sins...your pockets of unbelief and cowardice and meanness and all that traumatic darkness... and the hurts inflicted ON you.

You'll figure out ways to deny it and justify it or blame others or suppress it. The point is, Gospel confidence...looking to Jesus who was punished in your place...that opens the path to true, courageous self-discovery and repentance and real joy... and when that's going on in your life you can welcome difficulties because you know God is going to use it (painful as it may be) God is going to use it for GOOD.

Let's come now in this posture...let's receive Jesus Christ and the grace we need... Let's look to Jesus and be saved.