

Fourth Sunday of Lent□

LIFT HIGH THE CROSS

Numbers 21:4-9

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Analysis by Ronald C. Neustadt

4From 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. 5The 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." 6Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7The 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. 8And 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." 9So 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.

Author's note about serpents and poles: The Oxford Annotated Bible notes that these verses echo serpent magic, as practiced, e.g. in ancient Egypt (cf. Exodus 7:8-13). Magic serpents and poles were also part of fertility religion (Baal/Asherah) that was always a temptation to Israelites (cf. 2 Kings 18, for example). In fact, the Israelites had even kept the bronze serpent and set it up as an object of worship during the Israelite monarchy.

DIAGNOSIS: Serpents and Sinners on the Ground

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Complaining*

Being bitten by fiery (*seraphim* is the Hebrew word) serpents is a problem, to be sure. But that was not the Israelites' only problem. Even before the serpents came along, the Israelites were filled with venom. "We detest this miserable food," they complained. And that was a complaint "against God and against Moses." They had been slaves, but God had delivered them from their slavery. Not only that. God had miraculously gotten them across the Red Sea while the largest army in the world was chasing them in chariots. And now they were complaining about the *food*? What was going on? After all, maybe they didn't like the food, but they were *free*. And did they really think that the God who had delivered them wouldn't see to it that they would have enough to eat and drink?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Self-reliant*

That's what sinners do, though. They complain. They complain because they don't love or trust the God who gives them freedom. They don't trust God to see them through the wilderness. They imagine that it's up to them to see themselves through the rough times. Similarly, when times are easy, they imagine it's because they've been so clever or so good. The point is, they always think it's about them. That's where their trust lies. In themselves.

But why do we say "they" and "themselves?" Isn't it just as true of us? Don't we find ourselves complaining when things don't go as we want (or boasting if they do go as we want)? And isn't it because we, too, trust in ourselves rather than in God? We may not have sacred poles or the same fertility gods that appealed to the Israelites, but we do have ourselves. And don't we like

to think that whatever prosperity we have is not because God has given it to us to use, but because we deserve it for all the “sacrifices” we have made to get it. As if we were our own gods.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Dying*

And just how far does that get us when the fiery serpents come? If we choose to think that it’s all about us—that everything we complain about is because God does not love us and that everything we call good is because we have earned it—what do we expect God to say? If we choose to place our trust in ourselves, what else can God say to us than, “If you insist on being your own gods, and will not trust me, then you won’t *have* me. You will have only yourselves, and I do not want that. Because without me, you will die.” It’s a sad truth, the truth of God’s own law. Without the God who created us, and who gave us life and freedom, we end up perishing.

Like it or not, there are some bites we cannot survive.

PROGNOSIS: Serpent and Sinner Lifted Up

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Living*

Yet, for all their complaining (and for all their lack of trust in the LORD who gives them both food and freedom that their complaining reveals), God is not content to let the Israelites simply die in the wilderness. Instead, God so loves the Israelites that God provides a way for them to live: “Make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” Good for the Israelites.

But good for us as well, because this same God who so loved the Israelites loves the entire cosmos as well – and that includes us. There is hope for sinners (i.e. complaining self-trusters like us) because of someone else who was lifted up—this time on a pole with a cross beam. Like the serpent, this lifted-up one was poisonous, too—but only because he had taken into himself

all *our* venom. That is, he forgave sinners. And in doing so he took responsibility for our sin, for our insistence on being our own gods. That is to say, he experienced God's own verdict on those who will not let God be God. So he dies and is buried – and we remain forgiven. For all of which—in a display of divine approval!—God lifts him even higher than the cross. And (it bears repeating), we remain forgiven. We shall not perish! What better news is there than that!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Believing in Him*

Nevertheless, it does get better. And the “better” is this: no longer do we need to rely upon ourselves for our life. We can trust the God who created us and who died for us. We can trust the God who has forgiven us and set us free from God's own critique of us for our sins. We can trust the God whose son let himself be lifted up just as the serpent in the wilderness was lifted up by Moses. When God gets it through to us that in Jesus we are “so loved,” we find ourselves able to give up our self-reliance and, instead, “believe in him.”

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Moving on*

The children of Israel had wanted to return to Egypt. Complaining was an expression of their willingness to go back to slavery rather than live in freedom and head to the land God had promised. After Moses lifted up the serpent, though, the writer tells us that the Children of Israel “set out” in the direction of the Promised Land. They moved on and they kept moving on, even though there were relapses.

When God so loves us into giving up our self-reliance and, instead, trusting Jesus, we find ourselves able to “move on,” too. Instead of complaining, we find ourselves living with joy in the freedom God has given us through The Sinner who was lifted up because of his love for us. We find ourselves

rejoicing in the forgiveness of sins he offers us. That is to say, we find ourselves living differently—not so focused on prosperity for ourselves as on the well-being of all. We find ourselves living in the freedom God has given us and serving our fellow bitten ones by directing their attention to the Sinner who died on a cross—and whom they can count on to love them eternally.