

Again & Again: God Loves First
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21
March 14, 2021

We are marking the one-year anniversary of this global pandemic which has taken the lives of millions of people around the world and upended the lives of everyone. Those of us who have survived stand on the shoulders of health professionals, grocery clerks, teachers, workers providing essential services, and so many more. Countless people have sacrificed their very lives to be on the front line combatting the virus and offering services to sustain other lives. We are deeply grateful for all who have given so much to adapt and maintain the flow of resources we all need to survive.

This morning's scriptures address such powerful acts of self-giving love. They demonstrate the depth of God's love for the world and God's love for you.

Multitudes have memorized John 3:16, which has been called the gospel in miniature. I'm sure that you can say it with me: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not die but have eternal life.

But how many of us know that the previous verse has a serpent in it?! This passage comes from a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee who sought Jesus one night. Nicodemus recognized that God was with Jesus, prompting a conversation about being born anew by water and the Holy Spirit. In explaining how one is born anew, Jesus refers Nicodemus to the story from the book of Numbers about Moses lifting up the snake in the wilderness.

During the 40-years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, awaiting entry into the Promised Land, they became impatient. They lost faith in God and in their leader, Moses. They complained to God through Moses but received no satisfactory response. "Why did you bring us up from slavery in Egypt just to kill us in the desert, where there is no food or water? And we are sick and tired of that miserable manna! Don't you have anything else on the menu?" Apparently, God finally had heard enough of their grumbling and decided to let them know that God was still active and listening. Poisonous snakes appeared, biting people and causing many to die.

The snake invasion prompted the people to confess that they had sinned against God and Moses. They begged Moses to intervene with God on their behalf. God told Moses to fashion a snake from bronze and place it on a pole. Each person bitten by a live serpent should look at the bronze serpent on the pole, and they would recover and live.

The image of the serpent on the pole is a kind of homeopathic medicine – medicine that heals by replicating the disease. Jesus draws upon that image to say that

as the Son of God, he will also be lifted up on a pole (cross). Everyone who turns to look at him, who believes in him, who gives their heart to him will have eternal life. Eternal life is not simply life after this in heaven. Eternal life is a loving relationship in God's presence right here and now. As the serpent was a savior for the Israelites, Jesus is a Savior for humans who are struck by sin, who are separated from God. By looking to Jesus, the chasm between humanity and God is bridged.

Nicodemus would have understood that Jesus was saying that he was to be a savior to the people in some way. He would not have yet known that Jesus was to be lifted upon on a cross. But he would have understood Jesus' meaning. Just as looking at the bronze serpent enabled recovery of the ancient Israelites, so would looking at Jesus bring the hope of recovery to those who are alienated from God.

Jesus goes further to explain to Nicodemus that his role differs from the serpents in the wilderness. The live serpents in the wilderness were agents of judgment when the people complained so much. Jesus didn't come to be like the biting serpents of judgment and death. He was not sent to condemn the world, but to save it. Only the bronze serpent was a representation of the role Jesus came to fulfill. He came to save those who are spiritually dying because they were separated from God.

The truth is that 2,000 years later we are still seeking recovery from our human frailties that cause us sin and separation from God. The original sin of Adam and Eve was the desire for knowledge of good and evil so that they could be separate from God. They imagined they could do life on their own. They didn't need God to show them the way to truth.

This kind of thinking that we can do everything without God leads to our trouble. To get out of the vicious cycle of our sinful behaviors we need to admit that we can't do it alone. We need a Savior, and in God's great love, God gives us a path to wholeness and salvation in Jesus.

In the wilderness the solution is a snake lifted up on a pole because the problem was poisonous snakes on the ground. In John the solution is a human (the Word made flesh) on a tree because the problem is the humans on the ground. God chooses to redeem the world by entering it. Christ comes to camp among humanity to save us from ourselves. God enters our human condition and experiences it fully, even to the point of death. In Jesus, God replicates our human experience to show us a more excellent way, the way of self-giving love.

God heals by sharing our condition with us. That's why when we look at Christ lifted on the cross, we find the saving power of God. Jesus knows and he has experienced betrayal, loneliness, grief, brokenness. He is one with us in our pain and one with us in the road to recovery. It is homeopathic salvation – healing by

experiencing our condition. As we gaze at Jesus on the cross, we realize the depth of God's love for us, we turn toward God, and we are saved from our self-centered ways. We receive the amazing grace and unconditional love of God who loves us first.

There is a true story out of The Field Museum in Chicago, which had a small collection of live animals as well as the stuffed and mounted ones on display. One night a herpetologist was working late, taking notes on some snakes the museum had just acquired. One was of particular interest, because no one had ever catalogued the species.

In the course of studying the snake, the scientist was bitten. He realized immediately that it was poisonous. He also knew that because the species was unknown, there would be no effective antivenom to save his life. He returned to his desk and began writing, describing each symptom as he experienced it.

The following morning, when other employees arrived, the herpetologist was slumped over his desk, dead. His notes told the story of what happened, and left a legacy for those who continued his work. The autopsy provided information on how the poison worked, and led to an appropriate antivenom. His experience of the serpent's sting meant that others might be saved and live.

The thrust of John's gospel is the love of God for the world – love so active, so passionate that it is expressed in the giving of God's child. God doesn't want us to be judged or condemned. God doesn't want to be separated from us by our wrongdoings. God desires to love us into wholeness. Jesus shows us how to live with God, how to participate in the life of God, how to receive and respond to the love of God. God becomes one of us, a human being vulnerable to pain and death, because God's love for us is so vast and deep. It's a crazy kind of love.

My friends, we were born as characters in God's love story. Again and again, God loves us first and invites us to immerse ourselves in God's wondrous love, the gift of ongoing life with God here and now. That's how much God loves us. When we can claim that deep, deep love, we want to respond by loving one another as God has loved us, with a self-giving love.

May you rejoice in the warm embrace of our loving God.