

It matters where we gaze
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-17
Sermon by Richard A. Kauffman
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Lent Four

Numbers 21:4-9: *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.*

John 3:14-17: *14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

I was probably in elementary school when my family took a trip through the mountains of PA. My dad was driving and as he rounded a curve a rattle snake slithered across the road. My dad, being my dad, stopped the car alongside the road and with his camera followed the snake into the woods to try and get a picture. My mother, being my mother, fearful her husband would get bitten by a poisonous, deadly snake, was beside herself. I can't remember if my dad got a picture of the snake; I do remember my mother's fear about that snake rubbed off on me. I suppose you could say my mother had *ophidiophobia*, an irrational fear of snakes.

In the Numbers text I just read, snakes weren't the first thing on the minds of the children of Israel. They were in a foul mood for other reasons:

- They claimed they had no food or water.
- The food they had—manna provided by God—was wretched, is one way to translate the Hebrew. The text might even suggest they were retching over the wretched bread.
- Why, oh why, they complained, did God and Moses bring them out into this wilderness to die?

They realized their sin when poisonous snakes appeared and some people died as a result. They had sinned against both God and Moses due to their cantankerous attitude. Seeing the error of their ways, they asked Moses to tell God to remove the snakes from their midst.

So Moses, their go-between, asked God to save them. And God offered the most unusual of antidotes for the snake bites: Moses was to put a snake on a pole and lift it up. Whenever someone got a snake bite, they were to cast their gaze upward toward the snake on a pole, and then they would be saved.

Oddly enough, the very thing that was killing them—snakes—became the thing that would save them. And strangely enough, two coiled snakes on a staff has become a symbol for the healing arts—a symbol of death became a symbol of health and healing. [Caduceus image on screen: 2 snakes coiled on a winged staff. The symbol came to us from ancient mythology, not biblical history, and initially signified ending conflict rather than the healing arts.]

This incident in the life of the Israelites raises some interesting theological questions for me, and I will not have time to address them all.

- What kind of God is revealed here? Is it a vindictive, judgmental God? What happened to the God who is patient, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love? Does God lack patience after all? Is God's love not limitless? Is there a limit on God's grace? Maybe God is more complex than we think sometimes.
- Doesn't this snake on a pole seem like a magic potion to you, like wearing a good luck charm or rabbit's foot to ward off danger? Oddly enough, the people were condemned for creating a golden calf, but then God commands Moses to create this image as a means of healing and salvation. (The snake on a pole did become a problem: eventually, the people made it an object of worship. Years later, during the reform of Judah by King Hezekiah, the King tore down the bronze serpent Moses had made, because people were making offerings to it.)

Another question: why did God take the Children of Israel on this circuitous route out into the desert? It would have been shorter and easier if God had led them up through the land of the Philistines along the Mediterranean. But no, God led them a round-about way into the wilderness toward Mt. Sinai. This was a longer and more arduous route. But why?

I want to dwell on this question a little longer by taking a look at geography in the Bible. "Geography is simply a visible form of theology" in the Bible, says Jon Levenson, a Jewish Hebrew Bible scholar. Geography in the Bible is seldom just about geography; it is loaded with symbolic meaning.

- The Bible is bookended with a garden—the Garden of Eden—in the beginning; and a city—the New Jerusalem—at the end. In between, so many of the key events in the life of the people of God, including Jesus' life, either took place in a **wilderness** or on a **mountain**.
- Think mountains in the Bible: God gave the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. Jesus preached a famous sermon on a mountain. Jesus experienced transfiguration on a mountain, and he was crucified on a hill called Golgotha or Calvary.
- Think wilderness: the Children of Israel roamed about the wilderness for 40 years. John the Baptist went out into the wilderness to preach repentance to the people and eventually baptize Jesus. Mark says Jesus was driven into the wilderness, where we know from other gospels he spent 40 days and 40 nights to prepare for his public ministry.

The Hebrew word for wilderness comes from the verb **to drive out**. The people were driven out into the wilderness, a barren place, a place beyond all boundaries. It was a place which stripped them bare and made them aware of their own limitations. The wilderness is the antithesis of the Garden of Eden on the one hand and the New Jerusalem on the other.

The wilderness stories in Exodus and Numbers are imbued with two motifs: **death and divine help**. The wilderness would lead them to points of despair, but it would also lead them to fresh encounters with the Holy One of Israel.¹ God “frequently moves to the boundary in order to restore the center,” says theologian Belden Lane, “calling a broken people back to justice and compassion.”²

Pandemic as wilderness:

It should not be hard for us during this pandemic to identify with the people of Israel in the wilderness. We have been pushed into territory that is quite unfamiliar to us, a place of danger and death. Our usual patterns of life have been radically interrupted. Depression, anxiety, sleeping and eating disorders are all on the rise. So is alcohol and substance usage.

People look longingly back to the way things were before the pandemic; and we eagerly anticipate a time when we can truly say the pandemic is behind us.

But I wonder: will life be any different post-pandemic? Will we have learned anything that will make life better than it was before the pandemic? We can learn life lessons without hardship, but my experience tells me that deprivation and death are better teachers than abundance and affluence.

I heard a Mennonite pastor this past week muse that he didn’t think we’d learn much from the pandemic because, he said, the Children of Israel roamed the wilderness for 40 years and they didn’t seem to learn much. Although I’m a realist about human nature, I am not so skeptical. I hope we learn a few things:

- About the way our lives are intertwined with the biosphere and our need to care for that biosphere as much as we care about our own lives and communities.
- About the way national boundaries can’t keep the pandemic in check, and if we’re going to lick this thing we need an international strategy. It should trouble us that our own country isn’t going to share the vaccine with other countries until most eligible Americans have received the vaccine.
- About the interdependency of all of life. It seems to me we have learned to care for each other in new ways, paradoxically when we can’t even be present with each other. My own family has done a lot of texting during this pandemic, keeping in touch when we can’t be together physically.
- About caring for people on the margins, who have taken the worst licks from this pandemic.
- About refocusing our faith on Jesus’ life, death and resurrection: The snake on a pole in John’s gospel became a symbol for Jesus—the one who was raised on a cross. The pandemic should reinforce our need to cast our gaze on Jesus, the crucified one.

Slide of serpent on pole in wilderness: In the 4th century a church to honor Moses was built on Mt. Nebo, which is in modern-day Jordan. The church was abandoned in the 16th century, then

¹ Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (Oxford UP, 1998)

² Lane, 46.

rediscovered and restored by the Franciscans in the 20th century. In 2005 a monument with a staff and coiled snake was created by the Italian artist Giovanni Fantoni, and was erected in front of the “Moses church.”

Mount Nebo was the pinnacle where Moses got a glimpse into the Promised Land, even though he never personally was able to go there. We too may be on our own Mt. Nebo at this point in the pandemic. We can see over into the Promised Land of the post-pandemic. Nevertheless, we should keep our gaze upon Jesus. In John’s gospel, Jesus’ death is also his exaltation; and his exaltation is his resurrection. We are to lift our eyes and cast our gaze on Jesus who is, yes, our Savior; but Jesus also is our healer.

Sara Wenger Shenk, who until several years ago was president of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, tells a story about her gay brother: after he had gone to a Mennonite high school reunion, where he was hit over the head with the Bible for being gay, he poured out his despair to his parents. “He declared angrily [to his parents] that he wanted nothing more to do with the church. On his way out the door, his mother called after him: ‘Don’t give up on Jesus.’” Her brother turned and looked at his mother with a warm smile.³ Don’t give up on Jesus!

In this pandemic wilderness that we have been driven into, we should cast our gaze on him who is our Savior, our healer, our friend. Don’t give up on Jesus! Amen.

³ Sara Wenger Shenk, *Tongue-tied: Learning the LOST ART of Talking about Faith* (Herald Press, 2021)