

“A Snake that Saves?”

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Sometimes you have to stare at the snake to free you from its spell.

Numbers 21:4-9

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Survivable scarcity

The last time Linda and I led a tour to Israel (2014), we visited Timna, located about halfway between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba a tributary of the Red Sea. Timna is part of the Wilderness of Zin, where the Israelites set up camp in Numbers 20-21. Boaz, our tour guide, told us the most commonly used Hebrew word for wilderness is *midbar*. It's a place of survivable scarcity. You can live in a *midbar*, but not well, not comfortably. There's vegetation, but not much. There's water, but it's rare.

Timna today is a tourist attraction. Nearby is a replica of the Tabernacle, built to scale. Time and wind have created intriguing geological formations, but of most interest to our story is evidence of 10,000 copper mines in the valley. The Egyptians mined and smelted copper at Timna. In a later Midianite shrine, archaeologists discovered a 5' long copper snake. Sometime later, Moses also made a copper snake at Timna.

Other than the copper mines, there's a lot of *midbar* at Timna. In the Bible the wilderness is both terrifying and transforming. It's a place you don't want to be, but it's a place you need to be. It's a place where you're aware of your dependence. Nobody likes being dependent. Everybody needs to be dependent.

Those who visit Israel almost always go to the wilderness before they visit Galilee. It's symbolic. We all need need. We need to be away from noise and hustle and crowds and light. We generally fill our worship with...something – words, singing, instruments, prayers. Today I want to intersperse activity with stillness and silence.

Gratitude

Numbers 21:4 says “They grew impatient on the way.” The literal translation is “the soul of the people was shortened.” It’s an agricultural word – used when you harvest a crop. You chop off the fruit and leave a stub behind. It doesn’t say their *souls* (plural) were shortened. The *soul* (singular) of the people was truncated. This was group impatience, mass discouragement, collective irritation.

Why? Probably for several reasons. The Israelites had for the second time approached the southern border of their Promised Land, but for the second time had made a U-turn. The first time was because of their disobedience. This time their cousins, the Edomites, refused them passage. This second reversal feels like they’ll never get there.

They name some other reasons in verse 5. They’ve seen their parents and grandparents (and probably children) die over four decades – some of natural causes and some as God’s punishment. They figure they’re going to die too. Which is better – slavery in Egypt or death in the wilderness? Which would you choose? They’re weary of the scarcity – bread and water, the essentials. They’re sick of the “miserable food” – literally, “contemptible” or “worthless.”

There’s something else. In verses 1-3 of this chapter, they’ve had their first taste of what’s to come. When they do get out of the wilderness, they’re going to trade it for war. They’ve been attacked, with some of them taken as POWs. They had prayed for God’s deliverance, and he answered. But their first victory over Canaanites previewed the grim task ahead in city after city. They would “completely destroy” the towns – putting not only soldiers but women and children to the sword – then annihilating the homes and buildings. War is brutal and they are getting ready to face it head on.¹

Notice that they speak “against God and against Moses.” Did they blame God and take it out on Moses? Or were they angry at Moses but realized God had always taken Moses’ side? Either way, what’s happening to their souls is common for those in desperate situations with no end in sight – blame. They don’t really care if it’s God or Moses. It doesn’t matter. Wilderness, wandering, worthlessness, and war.

They’ve lost their way, haven’t they? They’ve forgotten they still do have food, they still have water, they still have a life. They’ve forgotten all God has done to bring them this far. It’s easy to forget, isn’t it?

Let’s take some time in silence for gratitude. With all we’re all dealing with, what can you thank God for today?

¹ I addressed the moral issues of the conquest in a sermon on Joshua 6. Let me know if you want a copy.

Anticipation

Verse 6 says, “Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.” Almost nobody likes snakes. I’ve heard a lot of snake stories this week. I’ve told a few snake stories this week. With some notable exceptions, most of us don’t even like to hear snake stories, much less experience them. There was a snake inside the Mitchell House about two weeks ago. Some people ask, “What kind of snake?” Most don’t care. A snake is a snake. Slithery, slimy, sneaky snakes. I’m not a fan.

What kind of snakes appeared in Numbers 21? Most of us don’t care. The literal translation is “fiery snakes.” “Fiery” is “seraphim,” elsewhere used of angels. Maybe they were horned vipers or cobras or puff-adders. There are eleven Hebrew words and four Greek words for snake, and not one of them is viewed as harmless, much less positive. Nobody in the Bible likes snakes. From Genesis 3 to Revelation 9, every biblical reference to snakes makes you shudder.

Whether these snakes are described as “fiery” because they’re reddish in color or because of the inflammation at the bite mark, we’re not sure. But they’re not good.

The snakes are God’s final treatment of the Israelites’ pattern of rebellion, unbelief, and grumbling. This is the last incident of its kind in Numbers. It’s not the last time they sinned – individually or as a group – but it’s the last time they whined about the detestable food or the lack of water. It’s the last time they said, “We’d rather go back to Egypt.” Snakes will do that to ya. If you’re God and you want to make your point indelibly, you want to put an end to grumbling, send in snakes.

What’s going on here? Why does God respond differently? He doesn’t threaten to kill them all, but neither does he let them off the hook. In spite of what the compass says (they’re going south when the promised land is north), they are closer than ever to their destination. The end of wilderness is in sight. Dawn is coming, but as Thomas Fuller first said in 1650, “It’s darkest before dawn.”

God knows that bitter people will not be able to win the battles ahead. You can’t take an impatient, irritated, discouraged army into war. You can’t lead people who are mad at God and mad at their leaders. In spite of the way that they have seen God deal with unbelief and complaining for 40 years, most of them have not learned the lesson. Resentment has not been expunged.

I believe God is going to do something fresh in the Church, in this church. I don’t know if we’ll be a smaller church or a bigger church when the pandemic is over. It doesn’t matter. Most of us are going to live through the pandemic and still have a life after the election. But even if we don’t, there’s the presence of Jesus beyond this life. Let’s take a few moments in silence to get our mind off the snakes and live in anticipation. What are you most looking forward to in time or eternity?

Confession

There's a wonderful turn in this text in verse 7. "The people came to Moses" – they initiated this response – "...and said, 'We sinned....'" It's only the second time this confession is recorded in Numbers – and the first time it wasn't sincere. The first time was in the incident with the twelve spies. When God said they couldn't go into the Promised Land because of their unbelief, they responded, "We sinned!" and tried to go anyway. They didn't really own their sin. They just didn't like the consequences.

This time the confession is real. You may say, "Well, it's just because they're afraid of the snakes." Maybe. That was my point earlier. If God needs to send snakes to evoke real humility, snakes it will be. God will do whatever he needs to do to bring us to our knees. God wants to free us from the bondage of whining, from the oppression of longing for the good old days, from the evil of self-reliance, from the slavery of resentment and bitterness, from the captivity of discontent.

How do I know their confession is real? It's not only that they ask Moses to pray for them – and he does – and not only that God sends relief; it's that it never happens again. This is about repentance. They've already made a U-turn geographically, and it was only that plus the serpent plague that prompted the U-turn spiritually.

The problems that lie ahead are going to be problems of false prophets and alternative worldviews. Those will be their nemesis for generations to come – even to the present. But at least from this one sin – the "good ole days" whining that spread from the outside into the middle of the camp or from the inside out – they're done.

What sin do you need to be "done with"? Let me be straight with you. I'm not talking about someone else. If you're listening, I'm speaking to you. I'm also speaking to me. There's nothing quite like preaching about grumbling to evoke temptation to grumble. Sometimes it's about other people, and sometimes, honestly, it's God. Can he not fix this? Can't we get back to how things were? December of 2019 seems wonderful. There must have been problems, but I don't remember them.

Let's take some time for silent confession. Take a deep breath and invite the Holy Spirit to cross-examine your self-justification. Who or what is irritating or discouraging you? Who or what is stretching your patience? Where have you substituted trust in this world's systems for God? For what thought or word or act do you need to say, "I have sinned"?

God

Finally, we come to the part of this passage that has most captivated believers for more than 3,000 years. Seriously, a snake that saves? God has told the people not to make any "graven image," and had severely punished them for bowing down to a golden calf. Now he tells Moses to "make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who

is bitten can look at it and live" (8). Literally the translation is, "Make a fiery...", a *seraph*. The NIV says he made a "bronze" snake. (I prefer "copper" because of the copper mines at Timna. It doesn't matter.)

Indeed, the children of Israel did misuse the snake on a pole in 2 Kings 18. But it was centuries later. We can misuse any of God's good gifts. We can misuse jobs and family and money and health and freedom. Christians have misused the cross for generations, turning it into a good luck charm. God uses tangible things in our worship and our daily lives; sinners turn them into idols.

The New Testament twice refers directly to this story. One is adjacent to the most famous verse in the Bible – John 3:16. Verses 14-15 say, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

The very thing you fear the most – in Numbers it's snakes and in John it's suffering and death – needs your focused attention. The very thing they feared the most, the snake, had to capture their gaze. Moses had to lift it up and they had to look at it. They had to believe the instrument of their torture would be the symbol of life. It's the same with the cross of Jesus. The worst thing we fear is suffering and death, especially if it's unjust. Jesus was hung high – raised up for our sins. He was lifted high so we need not fear death.

Sometimes you have to stare at the snake to free you from its spell. Sometimes you have to take the "What if" question to its logical conclusion. What's the worst that might happen? On the other side of it there's still life, still God, still grace.

The other New Testament passage that deals with this story is 1 Corinthians 10. Paul says, "We should not test Christ, as some of them did – and were killed by snakes."

Paul continues, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it" (1 Cor. 10:12-13).

The wilderness is a place you pass through. You don't stay there. You won't stay there. You want the focus of this passage to be on "the way out." You want to know what it is, or at least what direction it is, or if not that, how long it will last. Another forty years? Till we die in the wilderness?

That's not where Paul turns your attention. He wants your focus on God, who is faithful. You don't ultimately need the way out of the wilderness. You need the wilderness. You need need. You need the snakes because they force you to look up. You need to stare down what you feared the most because beyond it you will see him.

In our final moment of silence today, let's just look up. Ponder or write down everything you know is true of God – his attributes: good, holy, faithful, just. Find your hope, your refuge, your peace, your contentment in his character. Amen.