

“The Other Serpent”
Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:1-17
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I learned a new word this week: “apotropaic” an adjective meaning “safeguarding from evil” or “intended to ward off evil.” Indeed, the roots of the word are *apo*, meaning from or away, and *trepein*, to turn. So something that is apotropaic turns away evil which might be directed at someone. It is a word which one might expect to find in a Harry Potter book, but in fact, it is a word associated with the Bible. According to one source of information about tonight’s passages, the bronze serpent which Moses fashioned and hoisted atop a pole in the middle of the desert was indeed apotropaic. Its job, its sole reason for being, was to turn away the poisonous venom of the snakes God sent as punishment for the Israelites speaking against God, and against Moses. It safeguarded the people from a particular evil which threatened them. We might imagine that when the threat of poisonous snakes was past, the serpent was melted down and used for some other purpose, perhaps as some other apotropaic object for some more pressing need.

By itself, this passage from Numbers is a wonderful story of God’s patience, God’s mercy, even God’s willingness to relent on a divine decision already made. Moses prays to God for the sake of the people who have repented, and an alternative is given. It is a wonderful story but a strange one. As it is placed in this book, it is one of several episodes in which the Israelites wandering around in the

wilderness are provided for by God even when they complain about all that God has already given them. They speak out against the exodus, the very act of God which freed them from slavery in Egypt, they speak out against the manna, calling it “miserable food,” that gift of God which saved them from starvation. They speak against Moses, God’s chosen leader. Time after time, they raise their voices in rebellion and each time, though perhaps grudgingly, God gives them what they need to continue the journey. What is strange about this story is, of course, the making of the bronze serpent, a request very much out of character with what God usually asks. Materially speaking, this is an object not unlike the golden calf which the people convinced Aaron to make and which caused Moses to break the first set of tablets of the commandments, though in this case it is commanded by God. But for God to allow such an image, even though it was not to be worshipped, is indeed unexplainable. But then again, “the wind blows where it chooses,” as Jesus reminds Nicodemus and God doesn’t have to be fully explainable.

Even though it is not one of tonight’s Lectionary texts, I chose the one from Numbers because it sheds some light on the Nicodemus story, in which we hear, “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Before we return to Nicodemus and his nighttime visit to Jesus, let us add in one other background story found in the book of 2 Kings about King Hezekiah of Judah, who, it is

reported in the eighteenth chapter, “did what was right in the sight of the Lord just as his ancestor David had done. He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan. Hezekiah trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among all those who were before him.” From Second Kings we learn that the Israelites had been for some time worshipping that same bronze serpent, and that it had led them into a trap from which Hezekiah must rescue them. And from that introduction to Hezekiah’s reign, we learn that it was a virtue beyond all others to name and unmask idolatry in the service of the Lord. Out of the dozens of kings of the nations of Israel and Judah listed in the Bible, there are only three kings about whom it was said that they “did what was right in the sight of the Lord.” For centuries, the leaders of the people, and the people themselves, practiced an idolatry which the witness of Scripture proposes as the very thing responsible for their eventual exile in Babylon. Too many times, the people ignored the counsel of the prophets and continued to worship other gods, their wealth, their power, even themselves. And in the end came the fall of a great nation and the scattering of a proud but misguided people.

And so, through the centuries, instead of being melted down and used for another purpose, this apotropaic bronze serpent must have been carefully carried

along with the people, perhaps someone tending to it and making sure its pole was straight and that it had a prominent place in the temple, even when the threat of poisonous snakes had passed, for certainly this was a wilderness phenomenon. It boggles the mind to think that what began as a divine and merciful antidote to snake venom became an object of such devotion and care that people forgot its original meaning. Or maybe it's not so surprising. After all, as Jesus asks Nicodemus, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

You see, we human beings are actually quite adept at mistaking the gift of God for the God who gives it. Let me say that again. We are well practiced at mistaking the gift of God for the God who gives it. In the Israelites' case, they ended up worshipping the material object, the serpent, and not the true object of their worship, namely the God who *gave* them the serpent. Perhaps this is not really so surprising, seeing as how the serpent is right there in front of you, you can see it, you get healed when you look at it. Sometimes it is so much easier to hold on to what we can see, and what we are comfortable with, rather than embracing the mysterious and the ambiguous and the uncertain, no matter how wonderful, like the Spirit, it may be. It's so much more comforting to lay our hands on something tangible and concrete than it is to shout into the wind looking for answers which never seem to come. This is true even when we know if our heart of

hearts that the giver is more important than the gift. If it weren't, we might live our lives quite differently.

If the giver were more important than the gift, perhaps we would stop worshipping our physical appearance and start tending more to the crying needs of the human beings with whom the giver has blessed us. Consider the idolatry in racism and sexism, in the disparagement of obese people, of people who stutter, who are bald, who are too tall or too short, or who are, heaven forbid, simply unattractive or disfigured. The idolatry of the body comes at quite the cost to society and to individual human lives, all because we have raised the gift, the human body, above the giver - God who has created human beings both equal and good.

If the giver were more important than the gift, perhaps we would stop worshipping our money and our possessions and start using them more for God's purposes than our own. Consider the idolatry in chronic poverty and malnourishment, in inadequate medical care or school systems, in the newest sneakers or video games, in the latest fashion. The idolatry of wealth comes at the expense of God who gives us everything and asks only that we use it to care for one another. We have raised the gift above the giver.

If the giver were more important than the gift, perhaps we would stop worshipping our freedom and power and begin to use it more responsibly.

Consider the idolatry in nationalism, in making war before it is a last resort, in detaining people without charging them with a crime and without allowing them to speak with a lawyer, in collecting data which can be used to deny health care coverage, in emotionally controlling those over whom we have real or imagined authority. The idolatry of free will and independence exists because we have allowed those wonderful gifts of God to become more important than the God who gives them to us but showed us how to use them on the cross.

If the giver were more important than the gift, perhaps we would stop worshipping our dominion over the earth and start taking seriously the God-given stewardship of the environment. Consider the idolatry in pollution, in overfishing, in burning rainforests and holes in the ozone, in redirected rivers and green golf courses in the desert. The idolatry of private property and never-ending development is part and parcel of our higher esteem of the gift of the earth than the God who calls us to till and keep the garden and all its bounty.

I'm not giving you this laundry list of sins and forms of idolatry to depress you or make you leave here with a guiltier conscience than you came in with, but to say something about how pervasive is the tendency to worship the object and not the object of worship. But that tendency is not just seen in our worship of the material, but also with the spiritual. In our passage from the gospel of John, Jesus makes the link between himself being lifted up and the bronze serpent which

Moses made. The lifting up of the Son of Man, of course, refers to the crucifixion of Jesus, his exaltation, and he is lifted up so that all who look upon him, all who believe, may be saved. The apotropaic, crucified Christ is the antidote for sin.

Those bitten by the human condition merely need to gaze upon the crucified Jesus to have eternal life. This is a divine gift of mercy, given by a great and wonderfully merciful God. It is God's great gift to us. But it is not the giver.

You may have met some of the same people I have, whose Bible has been condensed to one, and only one, of the verses we read tonight. The death of Christ comes dangerously close to being the bronze serpent to which it is compared when, once its purpose has been served, it remains the continuing focus of our attention. By this I mean that if concern for our salvation, or even for that of someone else, is our ongoing preoccupation, it is rather like being bitten by the poisonous snake, gazing upon the bronze serpent and then continuing to fix your gaze on the serpent instead of living your life as the healed and saved person you are. This is the entire point of John Calvin's misunderstood doctrine of predestination, for which our Presbyterians siblings in the faith are so well known. You only need to look on the serpent once after you've been bitten. You're healed, you don't need to worry that God didn't get all the poison out. You can go and live your life in gratitude for the second chance you've been given. But obsessing about the condition of your soul is worshipping the gift of salvation and not the giver of it. If it sounds like I am

picking on those guys at sporting events holding up their “John 3:16” signs, I am. But I would apply the same critique to anyone who held up their favorite Divine gift above the giver, whether that gift be the gifts of the Spirit, the vision of Heaven in Revelation, the Prophets, the Beatitudes, or any other part of Scripture that was mistaken for the whole witness of the story of God’s grace. It is hard to imagine that we can idolize Scripture, but we do just that when we lift up one part over the rest. And we are the poorer for it, never experiencing the fullness of God’s gifts, for worshipping just one.

Permit me one final example, if you will. One of God’s great gifts to us is the church year lived out through the church’s calendar. Beginning with the First Sunday of Advent and continuing through to Christ the King Sunday, the celebrations of the liturgical year take us through the length and breadth of the Christian story and experience. It is appropriate during Lent to spend a greater part of our time reflecting on the suffering Christ underwent on the cross and on our sinfulness, just as it is appropriate during Advent to concentrate on the incarnation of Christ, and our preparation for receiving him. However, if the church year becomes only an occasion for changing the color of the sanctuary textiles, or if we don’t observe it fully and only read texts about the death of Christ and never about his birth or his life or his ascending into heaven, we have taken the gift of the seasons and forgotten the giver, for we will have fixed our attention on what is

only part of the story, just as the bronze serpent was only a momentary part of the story of the people of Israel.

You may by now be looking around for an apotropaic object which will safeguard you from hearing more of this sermon, but I assure you that I am concluding. Let me leave you, however, with this final thought on this second Sunday in Lent: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” God gave us Jesus Christ that we might have eternal life, an eternal and abundant life which *begins* when we accept the gift, but which deepens with our knowledge of the fullness of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, and our worship of the giver. As you continue to journey through this holy Season of Lent, preparing yourself for Easter, may you find your eyes opening not only to the gifts God has given you, but especially to God who gives them. Amen.