

GOOD NEWS/BAD NEWS¹
Numbers 21: 4-9; John 3: 14-21
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Moses is known for one spectacular foray into the healing arts. When poisonous snakes attacked the Jews in the desert, God's prescription instructed Moses to fashion a special healing instrument: a pole topped with the form of a bronze snake. When the pole was held up, those who had been afflicted with snakebites would gaze on the image of the snake and be cured.

I

When we read a story like this we are delving into very old and primitive symbolism, older even than the Bible. Cult images of a snake have been found dating back thousands of years before the time of Moses.

This ancient symbol associated with healing runs right up through the ancient Greek symbol called the Caduceus, which was a short staff entwined by two snakes forming a double helix, and often bearing wings at the top of the staff. In Greek mythology, this staff was often carried by the god Hermes. Also in Greek mythology is the Rod of Asclepius, which consists of a single serpent entwined around a staff, and symbolizing healing.

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It is possible that the story of Moses lifting up the snake on a pole in the book of Numbers influenced the symbol of the Rod of Asclepius, and possibly influenced the use of it today as a symbol of the medical profession. But whatever the origin of the snake entwined on a pole, you can be sure that it is exceedingly ancient.

II

I mention this because the surprising element of the snake on a pole story is that the very source of the ailment is used as a cure. The way the story is told, the people whine to Moses about their diet: they are tired of manna. When in their desert wandering they encounter venomous snakes, the people conclude that God sent the snakes to punish them for whining about their menu. So they cry out to Moses, who in turn cries out to God on their behalf. Curiously, God does not do what you would expect: namely, just make the snakes disappear. God's startling solution is to provide a remedy in the midst of the threat instead of removing the threat. The snake's bite kills; yet gazing at the bronze snake on a pole heals!

The cure, in other words, resembles the affliction. This is not unlike the use of certain vaccines in modern medicine. The way we were finally able to prevent polio and smallpox was by putting some of those very diseases into healthy bodies and allowing those bodies to build up immunity. The germ we needed to defeat became its own worst enemy.

And remarkably, snakebites today are treated with anti-venom manufactured from small quantities of snake venom that stimulate the production of anti-bodies in the blood. It is the same idea pictured in this ancient story about Moses: the source of the affliction itself becomes the remedy.

III

Now before us is another biblical story, this one about a man named Nicodemus, and he could be any successful person we know. He was so successful, in fact, that most people knew him only by his official positions. He is described as a leader and a teacher. He demanded respect from all; he was an elite among the elite of the Pharisees. He was part of the inner circle; he was on the %A List+; he was upper crust; he wore Brooks Brothers suits; he was one of the beautiful people of Jerusalem. Yet something drew him to Jesus.

Nicodemus reminds me of the book written by Will Willimon entitled *The Gospel for the Person Who Has Everything*.² Willimon argues that the church has gotten into a rut of using the same pattern for Christian commitment. He calls it the %was miserable and then I found Jesus+ pattern. The point is that there are plenty of people who don't enter the Christian faith that way. They are not miserable. They are not unhappy or

² William H. Willimon, *The Gospel for the Person Who Has Everything* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1978).

at the end of their rope. They are, in fact, on top of their game, successful in every measurable way, and for all the world seem to be as reasonably happy and content as a person can be. But they sense that there is something more in Christ that would give their lives even greater meaning. That is when they quietly go about exploring the Christian faith.

So we see this man Nicodemus, much like that successful person, quietly encountering Jesus. It was at night, perhaps after a long day at the office or classroom, attending meetings and keeping appointments and making important decisions.

So here he comes to Jesus by night, and we have this eternally fascinating conversation recorded for generation after generation to ponder. But what I want especially to point out today is that in this conversation, Jesus was thinking of that old story about the snake on the pole. Here's what Jesus said: *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.*³

You will notice that Jesus did not have to tell Nicodemus the whole story. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a teacher of Israel, a leading scholar of scripture. All Jesus had to do was to mention the snake on a pole story, and Nicodemus knew the whole thing from start to finish. It was like the old

³ John 3: 15.

story about the friends who told the same jokes so often that they just numbered them. Then all they had to do was to call out a number and everyone knew the joke.

Here Jesus just made slight reference to a story that Nicodemus already knew well. Maybe Jesus could see that in some ways this successful leader of Jerusalem was suffering from the venom of a different kind of snakebite. Nicodemus was a public figure, subject to rumor and second guessing, subject to jealousy and pot-shots from those who always seemed to know what he should have done but didn't, subject to withering criticism and second-guessing.

Jesus knew that underneath all of his self-confidence and genuine leadership abilities— underneath all his successes and accomplishments— underneath all his confidence and pride— was a keen awareness that he wanted an even deeper insight into the ways of God. So Jesus said that he needed to look up, just as those ancient people looked up at that snake on a pole. But when Jesus asked Nicodemus to look up, it was not to gaze at a snake, but at Jesus himself!

IV

And what he asked Nicodemus to do was the same thing that he asks every generation to do: *to believe in him*. If that is what it means to follow Christ, then we better be sure that we know what that little phrase means.

We gladly hold up Christ and say that we should believe in him. But let us be very honest about exactly what that means.

It means that we conceive of God the way Jesus did. It means that we trust that Jesus was right about God! Many people today have been taught that God is a kind of tyrannical king or an austere judge. They have been taught that if you do something wrong God will get you.

Is that much different from the Israelites who concluded that poisonous snakes were the result of their whining about their diet? From our perspective, it is easy for us to see that their whining about their diet of manna had nothing to do with the fact that they were traveling through a desert filled with poisonous snakes. But to them, there was a direct link! Correlation is not causation! But they thought that if you complain about the cook; you get poisonous snakes!

But Jesus had a different conception of God. He described this God in a series of unforgettable images. God is like a shepherd who will not stop until he finds a lost sheep. That one little sheep is just that important, even though he has 99 more! God is like a woman who turns the house upside down looking for a single lost coin, and when she finally finds it back in some dusty corner behind the chest of drawers, she throws a party and celebrates with her friends. God is like a father who longs for the return of a prodigal son, and when he sees that boy walking down the main street of

town, with all the nosey neighbors staring holes through him because they know what kind of life he has been living, the father runs out in front of all those disapproving neighbors and throws his arms around his boy, puts a ring on his finger and kills the fatted calf, calls in the very neighbors who had been so critical, and throws the biggest rip-roaring party that town has ever seen! That's the kind of God Jesus taught, and that's the kind of God people still have trouble accepting today.⁴

To believe in Jesus means trusting that God is like that. It means accepting the reality that we are dealing, not with a tit-for-tat God, not with a %Gotcha!+God, not with an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, blow for a blow, measure for measure, pound for pound, *quid pro quo*, just deserts, taste your own medicine, comeuppance kind of God.

It cost Jesus his life to proclaim and to demonstrate that kind of God. But whenever we celebrate Easter we remind ourselves that Jesus was right all along, that God really is THAT kind of God, the kind of God who is greater than all the death-dealing, soul destroying, mind numbing, blood letting, race baiting, class dividing, nationalistic, godlets this world loves to worship.

V

⁴ All three parables (lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son) are found in Luke 15.

It is the God of Jesus Christ that brings people together, breaks down walls of division, creates community, forgives our stupidities, gathers us as a family of faith, insists on justice for all, inspires our work, energizes our worship, and sends us out into our world to lift up the cross that proclaims just that conception of God.

It is both good news and bad news. The bad news is that the world is still infatuated with that other kind of God, but the good news is that infatuation does not last forever, and when it finally runs its course, there is the God of Jesus Christ, still waiting on God's prodigal children to come home at last.