

The Way Things Used to Be  
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Numbers 21:4-9 (CEB)

4 They marched from Mount Hor on the Reed Sea[a] road around the land of Edom. The people became impatient on the road. 5 The people spoke against God and Moses: “Why did you bring us up from Egypt to kill us in the desert, where there is no food or water. And we detest this miserable bread!” 6 So the Lord sent poisonous[b] snakes among the people and they bit the people. Many of the Israelites died.

7 The people went to Moses and said, “We’ve sinned, for we spoke against the Lord and you. Pray to the Lord so that he will send the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

8 The Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous snake and place it on a pole. Whoever is bitten can look at it and live.” 9 Moses made a bronze snake and placed it on a pole. If a snake bit someone, that person could look at the bronze snake and live.

John 3:14-21

14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One[a] be lifted up 15 so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. 16 God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. 17 God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him isn’t judged; whoever doesn’t believe in him is already judged, because they don’t believe in the name of God’s only Son.

19 “This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil. 20 All who do wicked things hate the light and don’t come to the light for fear that their actions will be exposed to the light. 21 Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God.”

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Can’t things go back the way they used to be? I so want things to be normal again. Before COVID I didn’t have to wear these uncomfortable and unflattering masks. Before COVID we weren’t denied the ability to touch and hug our friends. Before Covid it didn’t feel so lonely, isolating or scary. Things just need to go back the way they were – things were better before Covid.

I know we’re all tired of Covid. Are we tired yet of complaining about Covid? It’s been around for a year now – seriously one year! Last year on March 15, we stopped having in-person

services and went virtual. I remember thinking that things would probably be better by the end of the summer, for sure. They had to be. But they weren't. Covid stuck around and got worse. And emotions all around became extreme – anger, frustration, hopelessness .... And a lot of complaining about the new restrictions and guidelines to be followed. Complaints about all that we were being denied. Complaints about how it was being mishandled. Everywhere we looked, it was so easy to see the bad, the negative and the disappointments. Seeing any positivity or goodness in this harmful and deadly pandemic --- it's a lot to ask. It's so much easier to complain and blame.

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As we've reached this milestone, it's divinely prophetic where our lectionary readings take us today. In the Numbers passage, the Israelites are still on their long journey out of Egypt, through the wilderness, heading to the Promised Land. And they are whining and complaining....again. "Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have to loathe this miserable food." We're in chapter 21 of Numbers and they started complaining over ten chapters ago. Complain, complain, complain... "life was so much better before we found ourselves in this desert."

The Israelites have established a pattern in life –

- Do bad things and disrespect God
- Bad things happen end up happening – there are consequences
- Pray to God for help
  - "oh, we're sorry, we didn't mean it, please have mercy on us, please save us, if you save us or if you give us the power and might to defeat our enemies, we promise to be good, to change our ways and never do it again."
- God hears, is merciful and delivers them in some way
- Thank God.
- Return to doing bad things and disrespecting God

This is a cycle that they continue ... and God oddly participates in as well.

They're complaining in 21:5 about this miserable manna, but just two verses ago, in 21:3, God was saving their behinds from war and enslavement, **again**, from the Canaanite King, Arad and his people. Ungrateful brats!

They have this unexplainable nostalgia for Egypt, when they encounter difficulty, thinking that it was so great. Was Egypt really that great? You were enslaved. You weren't free. You might have had shelter and food, but was it what you wanted? Were you really happy? What about being enslaved in Egypt was so great that you are unable to see any potential betterment in the future ... ahead of you?

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So, in this latest rant, God responds to their cantankerous, petulant tantrum with anger, sending poisonous serpents among them. The snakes bite the Israelites and some of the people die. I'm not a fan of snakes, so I can imagine the fear and chaos people must have felt. If you've heard of the movie, Snakes on a Plane, I can relate to Samuel L. Jackson expressing his "*dissatisfaction*" with those snakes on that plane.

So, according to the cyclical-script, the Israelites pray to God for help and apologize. God has mercy upon them and instructs Moses to create a bronze serpent and put it atop a stick. Those bitten by snakes can then look upon the bronze serpent and not die. Looking upon the bronze serpent –they will survive the poisonous bite, they will live.

When I think of this situation, I had a thought and I wonder if you had it also.

In all of God's love and mercy, instead of having Moses make a bronze serpent to put upon a stick, why didn't God just get rid of the snakes?

Wouldn't that have been easier?

Maybe. But it's our reading today from the gospel of John that helps me to understand why God likely didn't just get rid of the snakes. In John's gospel, speaking of himself, Jesus compares himself to the bronze serpent, lifted upon on a cross for people to look upon so that they may live. For the Israelites in 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C., for followers of Jesus in 1<sup>st</sup> Century and for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century ... the message is the same.

In the face of death, focus on God.

I don't think that God took the poisonous snakes away because the reality of life is that there will always be among us, those things that threaten life. Poisonous serpents, greed, gluttony, covetousness, war, famine, egotism ... COVID-19; there is always something, multiple somethings that threaten our lives – physical lives and our spiritual lives. To live – not just live now, or live eternally, but to live abundantly and with great passion, flourish and love, for now and forever... we need all the help we can get to focus on God, always --- Especially when there are so many distractions --- particularly when we so easily fall into complaining and blaming.

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COVID is horrible. I'm tired of it and what it has done to our lives. But, while I'm complaining about it, and let's face it I'm probably not going to stop complaining, I'm going to do my best to focus on God in the midst of it and maybe I'll have more God time and less complaining and blaming time.

God said look upon the bronze serpent, *so that it will lead you to **think of Me, to be closer with Me.*** So that you can live.

God sent Jesus, to be lifted up – so that we can forever look upon him and think of God...and be closer with God. Mortality and death are overcome by gazing upon the risen Christ who defeated their power. Jesus was sent so that we will live.

AMEN