

Snakes in the Camp

Hespeler, 14 March 2021 © Scott McAndless – Lent 4

Numbers 21:4-9, Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21

This morning, we read perhaps one of the most beloved Bible verses of all times: John 3:16. **“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.”** And I certainly understand why people love this verse so much. It is an almost perfect expression of the gospel and of the grace and love of God. But I’m going to be honest here, there is another verse in that reading that I would say I love even more than verse 16, and that is the verse that comes right after it. **“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.”**

Being saved

The thing I love about that verse is that it describes just how limitless God’s love really is, that it is able to extend even to the whole world. It also brings us to the term that I want to focus on this morning and that is the word “saved.” This verse makes it quite clear that Christ’s purpose in coming had to do with saving people, indeed with saving the whole world. But I find that that past participle, *saved*, and the connected noun which is *salvation* have become a bit problematic for the church today. You see, they are words that have taken on special meaning in the life of the church where they mean something very different than they would to people outside the church.

When we talk about salvation in the church, we are usually talking about saving people from their sins or their guilt and we often mean getting people to heaven after they die. Do you realize that, outside the church, when somebody uses the words, “You saved me,” they are almost never talking about sin or heaven? But when we use those same words speaking to God in church, that is almost all we ever mean. It’s a little bit funny.

What did John mean by “saved”?

But what does being saved mean in the passage we read from the Gospel of John. Is it the churchy definition, or the one that people actually use in the world? Well, to answer that, I think we should look closer at the verse *before* the more famous one. Just before the verse about how God so loved the world, we have a verse that goes like this: **“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”** So, whatever sort of salvation is being spoken of in this passage, it must be something like what was there when Moses lifted up a serpent in the wilderness.

Snakes in the Camp

And that brings us to the odd passage that we read from the Book of Numbers this morning. It is, in many ways, one of the typical stories of the wandering of the people of Israel in the wilderness. The people get upset and mad at Moses and they start to complain. And then, following the pattern of many other stories, God sends some sort of punishment.

But this punishment is really kind of special. **“Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people,**



and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.” That is how the story is usually translated and, it is a pretty horrific story, kind of like the stuff of nightmares. Can you imagine being stuck in a situation where your whole camp is overrun with poisonous snakes? It makes my skin crawl just to think about it!

It is actually “*Seraphim Serpents*”

But that translation is not quite as simple as that. Because the word for poisonous is not in the original Hebrew text. What it actually says in Hebrew is that God sent *seraphim* serpents among the people. Hmm, seraphim, where have I heard that word before? Oh yes, I remember. It is a word that is used a number of times in the Bible to describe various supernatural beings. There seem to be two kinds of angels in the Bible, cherubim and seraphim. We even often still use the singular form of those words in English when we speak of cherubs and seraphs. So what it literally says in the original Hebrew is that heavenly beings in the form of serpents invaded the camp. Now what are we supposed to do with that?

If our experience with the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that anytime you have a large group of people living in a communal setting, like nomads camping together, there is a very real danger of various kinds of sickness spreading quickly with devastating effect. I suspect that is the kind of thing that is being described in this passage. Again, as we all know, such a situation can be extremely bewildering and frightening and that is the kind of terror that we see in this passage as the people despair.

Some Kind of Spiritual Attack

Because they couldn't really understand what was terrifying them, they naturally described it in supernatural terms. The use of the word seraph, a word for a supernatural being, is basically their way of saying that they are under attack in many ways. It's not just a physical sickness, it's also a terror of the heart. A camp infested with seraphim is a camp that is in the midst of a spiritual battle where they feel under attack in their minds, their bodies and their spirits.



That is the horror that is being described in this passage. And that is what prompts them to seek for salvation. **“The 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.’”** And, in response, God tells Moses to make a representative of these seraphim creatures out of bronze and put it on a pole.

The Problem with Moses' Response

Now, I have so many questions about this. Is this not the same Moses who gave the commandment about how you shall not have any “graven images” of heavenly creatures who is making this graven image of a seraphim, which is a heavenly creature? It is indeed a bit of a problem and becomes a very real problem later on in Israel's history. But, on a certain level, what Moses does makes a lot of sense. The people are scared of what seems like a supernatural enemy that is beyond their understanding, and Moses takes their abstract fears and makes them something concrete, something that they can look at. And it is that that saves them.

mRNA Vaccines

In a way, it is kind of what researchers like Moderna and Pfizer have done by creating messenger RNA vaccines to save our population from Covid-19. This is an amazing new approach to making vaccines where the vaccine doesn't actually contain any of the virus. What it does rather is teach your cells how to make a protein that is part of the virus. It is like you are actually creating an image of the thing that is attacking you. That image teaches your body that there is a way to defeat it. That is how an mRNA vaccine works. And that is basically what Moses did when he made a bronze image of the thing that was attacking them and that image taught them that it could be defeated.



You see, salvation in the Bible actually means what we generally mean by salvation in the real world. It is not limited to spiritual things like forgiving sins or getting people into the afterlife, salvation is actually about God meeting us wherever we are. If you are sick, salvation comes in the form of healing. If you're drowning in the water, salvation is someone reaching out a hand or a life preserver. If you're terrified of something, salvation may come in the form of giving you a way to manage that fear. And that's kind of what Moses did for the children of Israel.

How is Jesus on the Cross like that?

And the Gospel of John tells us that when Jesus was nailed up on the cross, it was just like what Moses did with that bronze seraphim serpent. That means many things. It means, first and most important of all, that you don't just need to look for one kind of salvation from Jesus. No matter what anyone might have told you, Jesus didn't just come here on earth to offer you a way to heaven. Jesus didn't just come to save you from your sins. I mean, yes, if those are the very things that you need at this particular moment, then Jesus did come to offer you that kind of salvation, but please do not limit yourself to seeking that from Jesus.

We All Need Saving

We all need saving at various points in our life. In fact, I might even go so far as to suggest that there is always something that we need saving from. The fact of the matter is that if you are struggling at this moment in your life from anything, then you can know that Jesus actually came to meet you in that struggle. Are you struggling with loneliness and isolation? Lord knows that many are in these days! Jesus came to save you in that.

I know that there are a number of people everywhere who have struggled in these difficult times and have developed certain ways of coping – maybe through drinking a bit more or self-medicating in some other ways, others have developed compulsive behaviors or patterns of relating with people that are not all that healthy.

These coping methods have helped you to get through this time and that is okay, but maybe you are starting to realize that some of the habits you developed are not going to serve you well going forward and you're beginning to see the need for a change and realize that that change may not be easy. Well,

that is also a way in which you need to be saved. And I'm here to tell you that Jesus came to save you from that.

Getting that Salvation Going

Indeed, any sickness you may be struggling with whether in mind or body or spirit is something that Jesus has come to save you from. But, of course, the question is how do we get that saving process going? The Gospel of John tells us that it works like it worked for the people in the wilderness when Moses made the bronze serpent. They needed to look at this thing that represented their deep-seated fears, and that triggered the healing that they needed. John is saying that looking at Jesus when he is lifted up on the cross (that must be what it refers to) triggers the same mechanism of salvation.

What I think he means by that is this: that picture of Jesus upon the cross is a perfect depiction of everything that we struggle with, whether it be pain, rejection, addiction, depression or frailty. If you see Jesus upon that cross, there is no denying that he entered into the very worst of what it means to be human. And the very idea that Jesus could do that while being, at the same time, both entirely human and entirely divine, means that he experienced all of the physical and spiritual and mental challenges we face.

Like the bronze serpent, the sight of Jesus upon the cross puts all of that into a concrete image that we can relate to and that helps to calm our fears and understand that we can handle this because we are not facing it alone. That is the salvation that Jesus offers to you and he offers it to you today.

A Salvation Exercise

So let us engage in a salvation exercise. Many of you have made a serpent to bring today. We are going to use that in our focus exercise. I want you to look at your serpent. Or, of course, you can imagine a serpent on a stick in your mind. If it makes you feel more comfortable, you can imagine Jesus on the cross. As we shall see, it is all the same thing. But whatever it is you are looking at, focus your mind on that image. Leave aside all other thoughts as best as you can.

Now I am going to ask you to think of something that is keeping you, right now, from being all that you believe you are supposed to be. It might be something in the world around you, it might be something in your body, in your mind or brain, or it might be in your spirit. Can you find one thing? Think on that one thing for a moment.

Now, would you join me in a silent prayer? Pray this: Lord Jesus, save me from... and insert that thing. Pray it again and a third time. Jesus does save. Now look at your image. Let that be your reminder right now and in the week to come that Jesus does save you. When you doubt that he does, look at that image. Let it remind you that the things you struggle with – the things that seem so big to you – are but little things to Jesus.

Lord Jesus, thank you that you save your people. Amen.