

**Again & Again: God Loves First
Numbers 21: 4-9 / John 3: 14-21
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In this fourth week of Lent our two Scripture readings remind us that we stand in a long line of God's people who again and again mess up, who again and again turn from God. And they also remind us that again and again, despite the ways we miss the mark that God reaches out in love to rescue and restore us to God, to our right selves and to one another.

In today's text from Numbers, we hear a disturbing story about God inflicting poisonous serpents on impatient, ungrateful and irritable Israelites who are complaining against Moses and God. When they admit that they are to blame for what has befallen them, the people repent and plead for Moses to pray to God to remove the venomous snakes from their camp.

Instead of ridding the camp of the snakes, which is all the people wanted, God provides what they really need. The true problem isn't the snakes. It's the peoples' rebellion against a gracious God. God provides a healing antidote to their bite, instructing Moses to set a bronze serpent upon a pole for people to gaze upon to be saved. Paradoxically healing requires the people to look upon the very thing that brings death in order that they might receive life.

This is a strange, obscure and disturbing story that shows up again in John's Gospel. Jesus draws upon this ancient story in the midst of his nighttime conversation with Nicodemus. Using the image of the bronze serpent lifted on the pole as a metaphor for himself, Jesus hints at his coming passion, his own "lifting up" in his crucifixion and his exaltation.

As a person with a deep phobia of snakes, I find this image of Christ as Snake to be incredibly disturbing. However, it's been brought to my attention that not only are snakes symbolic of our worst fears, but they are also symbols of life, death, transformation, or healing. The American Medical Association uses the symbol of a healing snake on a pole for its logo.

Deliverance from disease is at the fore of our minds these days. This is the second year in a row when the season of Lent is disrupted by the pandemic. We are in an urgent race to distribute vaccines that will protect us. Sometimes science uses the cause of a disease to make a vaccine against the disease. Anti-venom is made by taking a bit of venom to create the remedy which will cure the person bitten by the snake.

During the Lenten season we are invited to gaze upon the cross of Jesus, an instrument of death, just as the Israelites gazed upon the bronze serpent raised on the pole, marveling at how God defeats death through death. Jesus leads us to ponder this paradox when he

says: *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. (John 3:14-15)*

He then continues telling Nicodemus that this whole story, especially the most unpleasant part, is about the love of God for the world saying: 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. (John 3:16)*

“Jesus’ statement is not about *how much* God loved the world as it is about *in what way* God loved the world, by sending God’s son.”¹ The purpose of the Son being sent is to save the world, just as the purpose of God commanding Moses to erect a serpent on a pole was to save the people from death.

There are many diseases that afflict our individual and our common life such as: greed, hatred, self-loathing, fear, violence and apathy. During the pandemic the wounds of deep injustices and inequities plaguing our social, economic and political life have been surfaced and brought into the light. No longer are they hidden in the shadows. There is no longer any doubt that we are in sore need of healing and deliverance.

“Again and again, the story of Jesus on the cross repeats every time lives are taken unjustly, every time the powerful choose corruption and violence, every time individuals forget how to love. Again and again, we are reminded: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.”* Again and again God offers us a new way forward.”²

“For God so loved the world. . . The whole of scripture is God’s love story. “It was love that stirred God’s heart at the pleading of the slaves in Egypt and offered them the security of the Promised Land.

When injustice threatened the welfare of the poor and powerless, God’s love raised up prophets to declare God’s desire for compassion, shown not just to insiders, but also to sojourners and aliens within the boundaries of Israel.

It was God’s love, stronger than well-deserved judgment that carried Israel through the wilderness. And it was the love of God that sent Jesus, into the world where he taught that love is not merely for those who look, think and believe like us, but even for our enemies and for those who persecute us.

It was love that moved the early church to open the doors of communion not only to Jews but also to Gentiles.

Even in our own day, when powers seek to limit God’s love by the exclusion of others from full participation in the community, God’s compassion for the oppressed and for justice have called forth prophets to declare that God’s love includes all- regardless of age, race, nationality, creed, gender or sexual orientation.”³

Again and again, God first loves. And again and again we are invited into the light of God's love, to expose all within us as individuals and as a community that is ugly, diseased and in need of healing.

There is vulnerability in being fully seen, warts and all; in fully owning our history, even the parts we'd rather forget. There is risk in telling our story, not only our glories but also the parts we'd rather hide away so as to not be defined by our blemishes.

A few years ago when going through old Westminster photos for our 125th celebration, a disturbing photo was discovered from the early 1900s of church leaders wearing black face. That photo isn't hung on our walls or posted to our Facebook page among the photos of what we celebrate about ourselves. Yet, that photo is part of our story, as well.

We entrust very few people with unflattering pictures of ourselves that we keep hidden away. We are willing to risk sharing our deepest shame only with those whom we trust, with those whom we are certain love us.

"And there it is- LOVE. Again and again, God first loves. Again and again God's love calls us into its redeeming light"⁴ If you take nothing else away from today, remember this. . . We have never been as truly loved as we are by God who gave the Son that we might be saved through

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Sarah Henrich, Working Preacher, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-john-314-21-2>

² T. Denise Anderson, A Sanctified Art 2021 Lenten series- Again and Again, Commentary on John 3:14-21.

³ Paul C. Shupe, Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 2, p.118

⁴ T. Denise Anderson, A Sanctified Art 2021 Lenten series- Again and Again, Commentary on John 3:14-21