



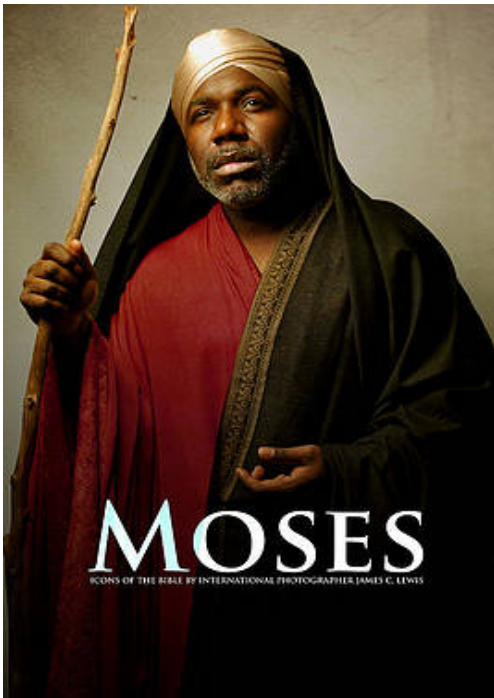
First United Church of Oak Park

Ironic or Strangely Miraculous?

Numbers 21: 4-9; John 2: 14-27

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Our first Scripture reading today comes from the Hebrew Bible, in the Book of Numbers, Chapter 21, verses 4 through 9. Listen now for the word of God:

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way.

The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food."

Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.

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." So Moses prayed for the people.

And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live."

So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Our second Scripture reading comes from the Gospel of John, Chapter 3, verses 14 through 17:

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.

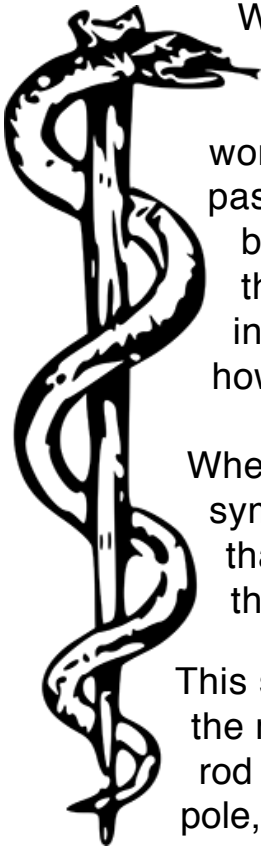
For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Would you please join me in prayer?

Loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

While I was growing up, John 3:16 was the only Scripture passage that I recall memorizing. I think it was for Vacation Bible School. If we memorized it, we got some kind of reward, so I did: “for God so loved the world, God gave God’s only son. So that whoever believes in him, will not die, but will have eternal life.”



When looking at these lectionary texts for today, I was surprised to see this John passage linked to the Numbers passage. What did snakes biting and killing Israelites have to do with God loving the world so much that Jesus was sent to save it? After reading the full passage from John I understood why they are listed together, because the Gospel writer literally references the Numbers text, the verse before the one I memorized. But I was extremely intrigued by the story in Numbers, the complaining, the snakes, and how it speaks to where we are right now.

When I read this passage from Numbers, I immediately think of the symbol used by medical and health organizations. I’ve come to learn that there’s a direct connection between this story in the Bible and the medical symbol of a serpent wrapped around a rod or staff.

This scene of Moses making a bronze serpent on a pole is likened to the myth of the Greek god Asclepius, who was the god of healing. The rod of Asclepius is depicted with a single serpent wrapped around a pole, just like the one in our story. These two stories have contributed to

the meaning we have assigned to this staff and serpent combination, making it a symbol of health and healing; however, this contradicts what we have been taught to believe about snakes or serpents in the Bible. We equate a snake with evil because in Genesis, Satan is portrayed as a snake, called wild and crafty, and God curses the creature.

Additionally, the God we meet in this narrative in Numbers is portrayed as punitive. The Israelite people complained, and God sent poisonous serpents that bit and killed many of them.

We are left with two difficult questions. Snakes: Are they evil or creatures of healing? God: Punitive or loving?

The Bible is many things, including, and perhaps most important for our understanding today, a record of how human beings' theology evolved. Though the writers of this biblical story understood God as punitive, we now know and believe that's not the best way to explain or understand why bad things happen.

Bad things happen. Wilderness happens. Right now, we are in the wilderness — the wilderness of Lent and the wilderness of this pandemic. We are surrounded by loss and grief; it feels like we have been in this wilderness for over a year, and in many ways we have been.

We are preparing for the death of Jesus, but we are also meant to be preparing for what comes next. Yes, for the mystery of Easter, but that is just one wilderness we will walk out of. What about the wilderness of this pandemic?

We still have many questions. We are struggling with uncertainty. It's easy to feel we are getting lost in the unknowns and the anxiety.

How and when will we walk out of this wilderness?

When we do leave this wilderness? What will we bring with us?

What will we decide to leave behind? What must we leave behind?

And what lessons about God can we take with us from our experiences?

The reading of these two Scriptures in tandem is an opportunity to see that God works miracles in the wilderness, redeeming our pain and suffering by using it for our protection and healing.

A bronze serpent is mounted on a staff: The snake provided protection from the snakebites.

Jesus is hung on a cross: Jesus' death protects us from death.

In this pandemic, the vaccine protects us from the virus.

Each of these is meant to alleviate suffering, and to give hope.

God is not punitive. God is love, calls us beloved. You are God's beloved. God's way of protecting us is miraculous and strange, using every bad thing and wilderness experience that comes our way as some part of our healing process. God doesn't make bad things happen, but God takes the bad things that happen to us and uses them to protect us and care for us. God's protection is with us always, wherever we go, even in sickness, even in the wilderness, and even in death.

Thanks be to God. Amen.