

Fourth Sunday in Lent
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Brandon McGinnis

The Crucified One, Our Brazen Serpent

As the great adventurer Indiana Jones once said, “Snakes, why’d it have to be snakes?”

After the cleansing of the temple, which we read about last week, John’s Gospel flashes forward to a nighttime scene: Jesus is conversing with an inquisitive Pharisee named Nicodemus. In their exchange, Jesus says that in order for a person to see the kingdom of God they must be born from *above*—the Greek word is *ANÓTHEN*.

But what Nicodemus hears Jesus say is that a person must be born *again*—also *ANÓTHEN* in Greek. Nicodemus is understandably confused. The double meaning of a single word derails the entire conversation, so Jesus needs a new way to help Nicodemus understand.

But before we hear those sweet, familiar words about God so loving that world and sending his only Son, Jesus harkens back to an ancient memory of the Jewish people. He chooses an image that will help Nicodemus interpret the forthcoming work of the cross and the rebirth of humankind through it. And that image is the brazen serpent.

It is an image given not only to Nicodemus, but—through the transmission of the scriptures—to us also. This is how Jesus would have *us* understand his work and our rebirth through it. If we want to see the kingdom, we must understand what is going on in this bizarre story of the brazen serpent.

The book of Numbers recounts Israel’s wilderness journey toward the Promise Land. If you’ve been in church for any length of time, you know this journey doesn’t go smoothly. Israel is always rebelling, with God constantly having to respond to Israel’s unfaithfulness. This story is no exception.

Now, in every previous episode where Israel complains, they typically do so against Moses or Aaron. But this time, they complain against **God** and against Moses. When their journey is unexpectedly lengthened by a detour around the Land of Edom, the people become frustrated and forget God’s miraculous provision. They now detest what God has provided and they want to go back to Egypt.

The offense is grave and direct—and so are the consequences. The text refers to the snakes that attack the people as “*ne-ha-sim seraphim*”—literally, “serpents, fiery ones.” This can either mean literal snakes whose venom burns like fire on the skin, or—more frightening yet—it can refer to the winged, fiery agents of God who serve in the heavenly throne room. In either case, Israel’s rejection of God has subjected them to widespread death and destruction.

When the people recognize their sin, they cry out to Moses to intercede on their behalf. And God responds by issuing a peculiar method of healing: he commands Moses to make a replica of these fiery serpents and to place it atop a pole. And the object that Moses

makes is referred to in the text as a “*ne-hash ne-ho-shet*”—a serpent of bronze or a brazen serpent.

Here’s the thing we need to know: in the ancient world, there was a widespread practice that scholars now call, “sympathetic magic.” The idea was that by making a ritual image of something, you could control the thing it symbolized. And it was commonly thought that gazing at a serpent totem could cure snakebites. In fact, objects like Moses’ *ne-hash ne-ho-shet* are found from Mesopotamia to Greece. But, it is very likely that the use of serpent totems had its origin in the land of Egypt.

For the Egyptians, the serpent was a cultic symbol of both life and death. Its bite could kill, but it could also shed its skin to renew itself. Pharaoh wore a serpent on his headdress, and Egyptian priests used a serpent totem when mummifying the dead. For the Egyptians, the *object itself* contained the power to heal and bring life. A snakebite victim only had to look upon the *object* to be cured. It was, by every biblical standard, an idol.

It is a great irony then that God should use an Egyptian idol to heal his people after they protested against him to return to Egypt. But God isn’t pandering to Israel’s misplaced nostalgia—he is turning a false idol of magic power into an icon of his divine grace.

In order to be healed, Israel was forced to look upon the image of the very thing that was killing them. It was not merely an image of a fiery serpent; it was also a symbol of their rebellious desire to return to the land of their captivity.

When Moses lifted up the brazen serpent, the people had to turn—to physically repent and reorient—toward the object of God’s continued provision. And when the people looked upon it, they saw beyond the mere object itself, into the abiding grace of God that it signified. The object—like Egypt itself—was powerless to give life; only God could do that.

The paradoxical symbol of life and death served as both Israel’s indictment and its pardon. When the people looked *up* and saw it, they passed through death into new life according to God’s grace. To look upon the brazen serpent was to be reborn from above.

Now back to Jesus and Nicodemus.

Our world is the same as the one Nicodemus lived in: a world that rejects God and rebelliously longs for the false life afforded by imperial power. Engulfed in sin, we have become serpents unto one another. From pornography to gun violence to atom bombs, we inflict fiery bites on one another that degrade and destroy our humanity.

But, just as Moses lifted up the serpent, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. What Jesus is trying to tell Nicodemus—what he is trying to tell us—is that the Crucified One is our brazen serpent! When we look upon the cross, we are forced to look upon the very thing that is killing us. To see Christ on the cross is to recognize that we have become so effective at killing the image of God in one another that we are capable of killing the very Son of God himself.

In forcing us to look upon our Deicidal sin—our capacity to kill God—the cross makes us acutely aware that all the empires of the world—whether they are Egyptian, Roman, or American—are powerless to give us life; only God can do that.

The cross compels us to turn—to repent and reorient ourselves—toward it. When we gaze upon the Crucified One lifted up for us, we see an image of both life and death: for we see the dying Lord of life who is at once our indictment and our pardon. When we look up to see the cross, we behold the clearest display of God’s grace, which brings us through death into new life. To look upon the Son of Man lifted up is to be reborn from above.

This Lenten season invites us to turn, to look, and to be healed. We are invited to ask ourselves what bites have been inflicted on us, and what bites we have inflicted on others. By setting aside all false antidotes and anesthetics, Lent invites us to turn toward the cross for true healing.

As Jesus marches toward the cross, we march toward baptism. As Jesus is lifted up on the cross, we are plunged down into the waters. Baptism extinguishes the fiery venom of the serpents, while cleansing us like a seraph’s flame. When we emerge from the waters we are raised up with Christ in his resurrection and his ascension, being reborn from that which is above us.

And the new life we receive is marked by a new sign of God’s effective grace—a new, paradoxical sign of life and death: bread and wine broken and poured out, raised up over the altar for all to see. When we look up to see the bread and the wine, we see beyond them to the cross and God’s grace displayed upon it.

The sacrament we are about to receive is a sign of the crucified one, our brazen serpent. It is a sign of God’s Son given to the world. It is given, not to condemn, but to save. Let us now receive it so that we, with Nicodemus, might see the kingdom and know that we are so loved. Amen.