

SERMON TITLE: “Look Up!”

TEXT: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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The 2003 Massey Lectures were delivered by First Nations novelist Thomas King and were entitled “The Truth About Stories.”

I listened to these lectures about five years ago when I was making regular trips from Vancouver to Abbotsford to teach a class at Columbia Bible College, and one of King’s lines that has stuck me ever since was this: “*Once we tell a story, it is loose in the world.*”

Stories matter. Stories attract and repel people. Stories move and inspire us, or bewilder and paralyze us. Stories give meaning and purpose to our lives.

And once stories are “loose in the world,” they can be used in any number of ways.

I have only been a pastor for 3+ years now, but one of the questions I consistently get is some variation of, “How am I supposed to make sense of how *weird* and even *offensive* some of the stories in the Bible are?”

Usually a long, and often very interesting conversation follows this question, but at some level I always say something like, “part of what it is included in being a follower of Jesus is wrestling with the stories we have inherited.”

As Christians we are a people of one big strange story and many smaller strange stories that are a part of this.

As we saw last week, the story of what God has done for the world through Jesus Christ is “foolishness” to many eyes. It doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t fit our categories of what is rational and prudent. It doesn’t seem like the sort of the thing that God should do.

It didn’t fit the expectations of people in the first century and it still doesn’t fit the categories our modern “enlightened” worldviews.

And leaving aside the “big” story of God rescuing his world through the execution of a Jewish peasant, our Scriptures are literally filled with incredible stories. Stories about talking snakes in gardens, about giant fish and talking donkeys, about arks and floods and parting seas, and plagues of frogs, and, well the list goes on. Delightful stories, liberating stories, horrifying and confusing stories, barely believable stories.

What do we do with all of these stories that are loose in our world and in our lives as people of this book called the Bible?

Our texts today revolve around one of these strange stories.

In our passage from Numbers, we encounter the people of Israel in the wilderness. They've been miraculously delivered by God from their long period of slavery in Egypt and are being led by Moses to the promised land of Canaan.

Only, this is no straightforward journey. Due to the stubbornness and disobedience of the people of Israel, they find themselves wandering in the desert for years.

Numbers 14 narrates how God punishes the people for failing to trust that God would lead them to the promised land, for complaining against Moses and God and longing to return to Egypt. God promises them that they will stay in the desert for forty years until the first generation of Israelites has all died.

So, they are in the wilderness. And they are complaining.

They grumble about the food and the lack of water and the generally unpleasant circumstances. And God has enough. The text says that he sends poisonous snakes among them as punishment and that many of the Israelites die.

The Israelites are distraught and they beg Moses to pray that the Lord will take the snakes away.

The solution? Moses is instructed to make a serpent of bronze and put it up on a pole. Everyone who looks at this bronze serpent is healed.

A strange story.

Our second text begins with a reference to the Numbers story.

We are much further ahead in the story. At least a millennium and a half has elapsed—we have come from the Israelites in the wilderness all the way to the time of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of John.

Jesus is in conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus about being “born again”—born “from above.” Nicodemus is having a hard time understanding what Jesus is talking about, and Jesus seems a bit exasperated with him, wondering how Nicodemus can be a teacher of Israel and not understand the importance spiritual rebirth.

In the course of his explanation to Nicodemus about who he is and what he has come to do, Jesus refers to the story from Numbers: “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.”

Jesus is obviously intending for Nicodemus (and for us) to make a connection here.

We know the rest of the story. We know that later in the story the Son of Man would, indeed, be “lifted up”... only, it was for the purposes of an unjust execution on a Roman cross outside Jerusalem.

Even though nobody would have imagined this at the time, Jesus knew what he was referring to when he told Nicodemus that he would be “lifted up.”

Another strange story.

So, what is the connection that Jesus intends for us to make between the cross and the bronze serpent in the wilderness so much earlier in the story?

In both cases, there is “lifting up” for the sake of healing.

The Israelites looked at a bronze serpent on a pole and were healed from the poison of the snakebites. And those who “look” upon the cross are also healed, albeit on a different level and in a different way.

In the first instance, the poison is literal enough. It comes from the snakes.

Of course, we’ve come across serpents before in the biblical narrative. In Genesis 3 it is a serpent who deceives the first humans and entices them to choose self over God, and humanity has followed suit ever since.

In Exodus, Moses’ and Aaron’s staffs turn into snakes to demonstrate the power of Yahweh over the power of Pharaoh—the snake being a symbol of Egypt (Exodus 4:1-5; 7:8-13).

In the NT, Jesus calls the Pharisees a “brood of vipers” because of their failure to produce “fruit in keeping with repentance, their perversion of the law and their leading of Israel astray (Matthew 3:7).

Throughout the Bible, and throughout the ancient world—Egypt, Canaan, Mesopotamia, even Greece—serpents were often a symbol of evil and chaos.

(Yesterday was St. Patrick’s Day, and legend has it that the Apostle to Ireland drove all the snakes from the island in the fourth century!)

In placing a bronze serpent on a pole, God is once again affirming his sovereignty and control over the evil that so easily ensnares and corrupts his people.

He is using a symbol for the poison of evil to cure the poison itself.

But, we may wonder, in likening his crucifixion to the raising of the bronze serpent in the wilderness, is Jesus comparing *himself* to a symbol of evil?

If the snake is the symbol of the problem—the “poison” as it were—why would Jesus compare his own actions on the cross to this?

I think what Jesus means by this comparison is as straightforward as it is profound. **On the cross, Jesus absorbs the “poison” of evil on behalf of the world.**

Just as the bronze serpent in the wilderness somehow took away the effects of the snake venom for the Israelites, so Jesus’ death on the cross takes away the effects of the poison of human sin and rebellion.

Just like Moses’ staff turned into a snake and swallowed all of Pharaoh’s snakes, and just as the bronze serpent showed the people of Israel that their God was both sovereign over evil and faithful and trustworthy to his covenant people, so Jesus, in likening his actions on the cross to a snake on a pole in the wilderness, is showing his people that he is bigger than the evil we let loose in the world, that he is stronger than the symbols we associate with pain and misery and disobedience.

That even though we at times, like the people of Israel, complain and grumble and don’t trust and follow, as we ought to, God takes the poison for us and leads us on in our journey to the Promised Land.

So what does this mean for us today? What are we to take from these strange stories “set loose in the world?”

Our stories as twenty-first century Canadians seem light years from stories about snakes in the wilderness thousands of years ago!

And yet, in some ways they are not so different.

Like Israel, we grumble and complain when things get hard, when things don’t go as planned, when we don’t see things as clearly as we would like to.

Like Nicodemus, we sometimes find it difficult to understand and put into practice the enigmatic words and ways of Jesus.

Like both the ancient Israelites and Jesus' contemporaries, we are well acquainted with the "poison" of evil set loose through decisions made by ourselves and by others, from the everyday events of our lives, in our relationships and communities to the global catastrophes we read about in the news every day.

Our contexts may be different in many ways, but like the people in both of our texts this morning, we, too, are people in need of healing.

The season of Lent is meant to remind us of this. As we approach the events of Easter—when Jesus will be "lifted up" as he said he would in John 3—we are reminded that we are implicated in these dark events. We are invited to repent and, once again, to look up to the one who can heal and save.

In other words, we are involved in this process of healing and salvation.

In Numbers, the people simply had to look at the serpent on the pole for healing. The implication is that they trusted God as they did so, but the text indicates that all that was required was for them to gaze upon the serpent and they would be cured.

In John 3:16, Jesus uses the language of belief. "For God so loved the world, that anyone who *believes* in him will have eternal life."

We are invited to look and to believe that this is how the poison comes out of our lives and our world. We are invited to be part of the process.

Belief, in the Jewish worldview, involves more than mental assent. We often think of belief as a purely conceptual task—we mentally agree to certain ideas and call it "belief."

But in both the Hebrew and the Greek, the words we translate "believe" have a much more all-encompassing connotation. They mean "to trust," "to rely upon," "to be confident in." They involve mental assent, but also include what we do.

Belief is a task for the head, the heart, the hands, and the feet.

A few chapters after Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, he comes across a man who had been crippled for thirty-eight years near a pool in Jerusalem (John 5:1-15). Jesus approaches him and asks him a question: "Do you want to be well?"

It seems like a bizarre question to ask someone who had been crippled since birth! "Do I *want* to be well? Of *course* I do!"

But Jesus asks him, nonetheless. Jesus does not force us to be well, does not force us to look up.

Jesus knows that part of our healing involves us an act of our wills. Just like the Israelites in the desert, just like Nicodemus, we must acknowledge our condition and express our need for help.

We're not always very good at this, are we? We're not always very good at looking up.

We tend to look *down* like the Israelites and complain about our circumstances, or describe how we have been victimized or misled or mistreated.

Or, also like the Israelites, we look *back*—often through rose-coloured glasses—at what is in the rearview mirror. We think of how good Egypt was, whatever “Egypt” might represent in our lives.

Looking up and looking ahead is sometimes harder to do. But this is where our healing comes from.

In Numbers, the Israelites acknowledged their sin and cried out to Moses for relief. Their healing was physical and immediate.

In the Gospel of John, a different kind of healing is in view. A deeper and more profound healing, a healing that goes beyond our physical infirmities and afflictions.

Even the Israelites who were healed from the snakebites, eventually died.

Jesus is talking about a healing that goes beyond this life—a healing that leads to eternal life, life that is no longer threatened by sin and death, life with God.

May God help us to look *up* to the source of our deepest healing. May we believe—in the deepest sense of this word—in the one he has sent for our salvation.

May we look with our lives to the one who was and is driven by love for the world to take the poison for us, and who invites us to health and to wholeness.

Amen.