

## **Numbers 21:4-9**

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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.'

<sup>6</sup> Then the LORD  
sent poisonous serpents  
among the people,  
and they bit the people,  
so that many Israelites died.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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.'

<sup>9</sup> 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.

## Mark John 3:14-21

<sup>14</sup>And just as  
Moses  
lifted up the serpent  
in the wilderness,

so must  
the Son of Man  
be lifted up,

<sup>15</sup>that whoever  
believes in him  
may have  
eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> '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.

<sup>17</sup> '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.

<sup>18</sup>Those  
who believe in him  
are not condemned;

but those  
who do not believe  
are condemned already,

because  
they have not believed  
in the name  
of the only Son of God.

<sup>19</sup>And this is the judgement,  
that the light  
has come into the world,  
and people loved darkness  
rather than light  
because their deeds  
were evil.

<sup>20</sup>For all who do evil  
hate the light  
and do not come  
to the light,  
so that  
their deeds  
may not be exposed.

<sup>21</sup>But those  
who do what is true  
come to the light,  
so that  
it may be clearly seen  
that their deeds  
have been done  
in God.'

## Reading the Torah This Week

Lent 4, Year B, the revised common lectionary gives us

"Snake on a Stick" – audio and notes from 2022:

<http://www.hereticslikeus.com/2022/06/snake-on-stick-numbers-21.html>

(with links to preaching notes from 2003, 2012, 2021)

"Numbers", named for its opening 'census' enumerations,  
"Bemidbar" or 'Wilderness', named for wandering in exodus  
Is unfamiliar to most of us save for juicy narrative bits  
A distinctive remake of Exodus or Deuteronomy sagas

Detoured yet again in this recital of a journey in stages,  
Edom has refused passage, Aaron has died,  
A skirmish at Horma (Destruction) –  
Brings the story to another revolt by the people

The complaints are familiar – dying in wilderness,  
no food or water – or bad food and bad water  
This time the divine response is poisonous snakes  
Many deaths provoking people to repent and ask relief

The response Yahweh gives Moses:  
Burning-snake or 'viper of copper' on a 'banner-pole'  
(check your translations – and replay your mental movies)  
Once bitten, a person looked at the sign, and lived

The 'Nehushtan' version was in Solomon's Temple  
Till Hezekiah removed it and cut it up 2 Kings 18:4  
In reforms rejecting diverse religious practice

Do you picture the 'Rod of Asclepius' – one snake on a stick  
Or 'Caduceus' or 'Rod of Hermes' – two snakes on a stick  
Ubiquitous among modern medical brand logos? Google them!  
Then stop to wonder how any of them 'works'...

## Reading the Gospel This Week

We stick with early 4<sup>th</sup> gospel this week  
John 3, 'Nicodemus at night with Jesus'  
Mostly familiar to our generation from 3:16,  
Slogan and meme and crucifix

This pairing with Numbers 21 may shift our focus:  
what is our affliction, and how is Christ crucified its relief?  
Replay your imagery from Torah, then of crucifixes  
Is it only an anthropological curiosity, primitive magic?

There's a lot of code here – compare translations...  
It's tough to unlearn their dominant interpretations:  
*pistis* 'belief' root, elsewhere 'trust' or 'faith'  
*apollumi* 'perish' root, elsewhere 'lose', 'destroy utterly'  
*zoë aioníos* roots 'everlasting' 'agelong', 'unending' life  
*monogenē* 'only begotten' *huion* 'son'  
*krinetai* 'condemn' or 'judge'

What spatial and temporal frame to you carry  
If not a '3-tiered universe' medieval myth  
or modern Protestant 'saved' 'born-again',  
cognitive assent to propositional beliefs  
to reach life after death, from/to which Jesus leads?

John's vocabulary of light-dark,  
Revealing 'two kinds of people',  
Reads easily as sectarian 'us vs them'  
Including antisemitism, but broader xenophobia

Barbara Brown Taylor asks;  
'What is saving your life now?'

From what do you need deliverance?