

Sermon Notes: March 14, 2021

Focus: Lift high snakes and Jesus?

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In The Wilderness In the Hebrew tradition –the title of the Book of Numbers is *In The Wilderness*. *In the Wilderness*, Moses hears God telling him to make a bronze snake that he will lift high above the people for healing. There they will see it and the poison will be purged. This is doubly bizarre in the context of the first five books of the Bible.

Exodus's golden calf: *bad*. Numbers' bronze snake: *good*? One way I make sense of this is that the calf was a rebuke of Moses' authority, and the serpent was a confirmation of Moses as a channel of God's healing. To make today's readings even more weird, just add Jesus. John 3:14-15 *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*

Snakes: *bad*. Jesus: *good*. Snakey Jesus: *good*? More coming about Jesus at the end.

Snakes and Calves in context: In the book of Exodus, Moses was spending way too much time hanging out with God on a mountain, and the people wanted answers *now*. When Aaron made the golden calf, he lifted it up as a savior. It's the calf who led them out of Egypt, he reasons. More pointedly, the people used the calf as an excuse: *we* led ourselves out of Egypt. The calf was a way to create the illusion of certainty in a deeply uncertain situation. Moses had spent all this time lollygagging around and the people craved a distraction. Aaron made the calf, presented it, saw how much the people liked it, and he made an altar for it.

Exodus 32:4 *He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"*

In book of Numbers, the Hebrew campers were impatient, but for different reasons. I have camped before, so even with my limited experience, I sympathize with these grumpy, tired Hebrews. Nobody wants to be on a perpetual camp out, but the description of God seems a little petulant: "you don't like this trip? Kazaamra kadabra, snakes!"

Numbers 21:4b-9 *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.*

My suffocating “exodus calf” I want the future of the Episcopal Church to be resolved in our favor. I am sorely tempted by a shiny gold calf. The next great program, donor, or guru will save us. I know *I* can make the church shinier than ever - if only I sign up for a \$995 workshop on church renewal.

My healing “numbers snake” Community is being built regardless of what workshop I attend. I have seen healing through this pandemic in our midst. People have rediscovered each and, against all odds, are connecting through this profound isolation.

My calf I want shiny gold certainty where the public schools aren't facing a demographic and financial precipice year over year. I want something to staunch the decline of the Danville student population. I have this quixotic hope that real estate prices, tax initiatives and construction starts (or lack thereof) would be different.

My snake I deeply admire a Danville teacher who loves my kid and uses the computer to do it. This teacher never would have dreamed of leading remote school, but she is the bronze snake on a pole that my family needs.

What is Numbers about? In the simplest terms, the Book of Numbers is a camping trip gone bad (after they left Egyptian captivity). The book starts with a census of those escaping Egypt and ends with a census of a new generation on the verge of going into the promised land.

The art of the serpent In the reading from the book of Numbers today, people are getting bit by snakes, but healed by bronze art. It is bewildering, but where does this serpentine imagery show up today in our own lives? Uh, like everywhere. Give up? Click [here](#) and you will recognize it immediately. The Caduceus, 19th century American battlefield lapels, modern EMT uniforms, the Rod of Asclepius (Greeks), Moses' bronze serpent (Numbers today) and even ancient Indian art are all variations on an image that includes one snake (or two) around a pole to evoke the skill of healing.

Jesus even refers to himself as a healing snake on a pole in John 3. Snakes: *bad*. Jesus: *good*. Jesus snake: *good*? More about Jesus at the end of page 3.

Think of Numbers as three wilderness stories with two travel logs gluing them together.

1. 1st wilderness - chapters 1-10 – Sinai, there we have the first count of the people and listing of all the regiments of the tribes who will protect the community.
2. Two chapters of travel to get to Paran.
3. 2nd wilderness - chapters 13-19—Paran where they could have entered the promised land quickly, even in a matter of days, but they chose to freak out and shrink in fear.
4. Two more chapters of travel to get to Moab
5. 3rd wilderness - Moab is the biggest section – chapters 22 – 36 --includes the second census. There's a lot of “unpacking instructions” for when the people

settle in Cana. The book ends with a new generation on the verge of entering the Promised Land.

I want to move past just snake bites to broaden the themes of Numbers that include *camping and fire*.

Key verses on camping Numbers 1:51-53 *Whenever the tabernacle is to move, the Levites are to take it down, and whenever it is to be pitched, the Levites are to set it up. Any outsider who goes near it must be put to death. The Israelites are to camp by their divisions, each man in his own camp and under his own standard. But the Levites are to camp around the tabernacle of the Testimony and watch over it.*

Where do you center your life? The Hebrews are constantly moving around, but when they make camp, God's presence is at the center. Priests and Levites surround this presence. Then all the other tribes fan out from that center. This orientation is not random and asks us the question --*What is at the center of our lives?* I am praying that day after day that we can keep the presence of God at the center.

Key verses on fire and smoke Numbers 9:15-17 *On the day that the tabernacle, the Tent of the Testimony, was set up, the cloud covered it and appeared like fire above the tabernacle from evening until morning. It remained that way continually; the cloud would cover the tabernacle by day, and at night it would appear like fire. Whenever the cloud was lifted from above the Tent, the Israelites would set out, and wherever the cloud settled, there the Israelites would camp.*

How do you follow God? (fire and smoke edition) This part of the story highlights being ready to move when God moves. In Numbers, when the fire moves, everybody does. Frankly, I could care less if volcanoes were the source of fire and ash in Middle Eastern geology (This was an obsession of scientific theologians not so long ago). For us, fire and smoke are about moving when God moves and being still when God is still. God will lead; we only have to respond. God will heal, if we look up. God will be our peace, if we are still enough to feel it.

Now Jesus He knew all of this history He was trying to help many disciples lift their eyes to him to have their hearts healed. This would be especially needed when he was being bitten by death on a cross. I like John 3:16, "For God so loved the world." But, I like Jesus-lifted-to-heal better right now. Life is going to bite us in the ankle, and we need somewhere to look. The Jesus I know evokes a faith in God who is active, concerned, engaged, and constantly helping us on our own camping trip life.

If you feel that your life is full of too much poison or you've been marching in circles too long, there is snaky Jesus. Let's follow a smoky and fiery Jesus who is the center of our healing. Let's not kid ourselves that we are in control of our destiny. When life stings, look up again.

Todd