Can it Be Explained?

A Meditation on Numbers 21: 4 – 9 and John 3: 14 – 21

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We crave explanations. We want to know why. Especially when bad things, painful things happen. We want to know what triggered a pandemic. We want to know why Flint, Michigan’s water system is poisonous. We need to know if we are responsible for worsening weather patterns, catastrophic phenomena.

That longing to know “why” birthed creation stories, the tale of the great flood, and Job’s allegorical suffering. Why are we here? Why do bad things happen to everyone? What happens when we leave this earth?

Nicodemus, a wise Jewish leader, craved one particular explanation: he ached to know how he could experience life as Jesus experienced it, experience God as Jesus experienced God. John tells us that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, when the work of the day was done, and the darkness allowed space for shameless conversations about sacred mysteries. If you go back to read from the beginning of the chapter, you see that Nicodemus doesn’t ask Jesus who he is. Nicodemus confesses that Jesus has come from God, that he is one who walks with God. Nicodemus knows this truth, but he is curious about the why and how of it all.

Jesus knows the question he brings before he even speaks it out loud. It is the same question each person brings to him: how can I know God? How do I find wholeness? Jesus responds: you have been told how you came into this life, how your mother birthed you. Flesh and blood. Find out what it means to be born of the spirit. Or as Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, “be reunited with [your] birth mother.”[[1]](#endnote-1) To which Nicodemus can only respond, “How is this possible? Explain it to me!”

Jesus gives a circuitous response, not really an answer.

Into the middle of this mysterious conversation (and can we just ask who is eavesdropping, jotting down this conversation? I’m always curious how we are privileged to hear so many private conversations in scripture.) Into the middle of this mysterious conversation, Jesus throws in a reference to a truly perplexing and terrifying moment from the wilderness wanderings of the Hebrew people, saying, “just as Moses lifted up a serpent on a pole in the wilderness, the human one must be lifted up.“ This is a story with which Nicodemus would be very familiar. Us? Probably not so much!

The serpent on the pole story is both perplexing and terrifying because I am not sure who should be more feared in this vignette: God or the fiery serpents? The people have just been given a victory over the Canaanites (demonstrating, once again, in their eyes, God’s presence and protection ), and have continued on their way. But as we have seen them do before, and as we would expect, they begin to complain again.

“We don’t have any food! We don’t have any water!”

“And, if you’re listening God, we hate this nasty bread!”

So which is it? The food is terrible or there isn’t any food? Can’t have it both ways…

Since they are having a bad day anyway, God offers them a little perspective, and sends poisonous snakes (fiery serpents) into the camp.

Many of the complainers are bitten, and they die.

Let’s stop right there because this story can be abused in so many ways. Let’s be very clear that God doesn’t punish people for expressing despair. Read the psalms! They are full of anguish and frustration and some of it is directed at God. God doesn’t punish people for complaining. If They did, we would all be dead of snake bite.

Let’s be real here –these are struggling wanderers, these people, who, when faced with the unknowns of their future landscape, romanticized their life in Egyptian slavery. The hardships in the wilderness were unlike the ones they had known. Freedom can be frightening at first. It wasn’t like glamping – glamourous camping – existed back in the day. There was no one to set up the beautiful tents, hang the lanterns, and set out the feast. It was all on them, and they were tired and afraid. To complete their despair, they encountered poisonous snakes and they needed an explanation.

The easy and obvious one – in their eyes – is that God (the same God who had just recently told them to destroy an entire city in God’s name) was punishing them for their complaints. I don’t believe in that God. But I do believe that we crave explanations when bad things happen, and when the reason is not apparent, we throw the blame on God.

Encountering snakes in the wilderness is not exactly out of the ordinary. Even a nest of snakes is to be expected. The people are the strangers right? The strangers on the serpents’ home turf. Getting bitten by snakes? Not that much of a surprise…but they connected the dots and ended up with a picture of God.

“God sent these snakes” they whispered to each other, ashamed of their complaints. We love quail sandwiches!” they cried in loud voices in case God was listening. “If we ever get home we will eat quail sandwiches and drink water every day! So yummy!!” They shouted to the heavens.

The story of the snakes was passed down as a cautionary tale: look what happens when you are ungrateful to the God of life; *you will be punished.* Human interpretation. Not divine intervention. We assume that God sent the snakes to *bite* the people, but it doesn’t say that. It just says God sent the snakes, just as God sent mosquitos and all kinds of annoying things. God sent the snakes *and* people were bitten. What the story **does** say about God is that God sent them rescue in a form they could understand. Tim Wrenn in the *First Reading* podcast exploration of the Hebrew texts explains this through the concept of “sympathetic magic.” If you go back to the image of the snake - in the garden - the snake was wise, that’s why Eve talked to the snake. The snake was seen as a symbol of resurrection. It shed its skin and became a new creation. The image of the snake is a complex one.

“God,” says Wrenn, employs “cultural packaging that they would recognize and access” by instructing Moses to create a bronze serpent and place it on a pole. This was a common medical practice – to make an image of the thing that brings suffering and, essentially, confront it. Stare it down. The people could gaze at the bronze serpent and be healed.[[2]](#endnote-2) (It is not unlike what we refer to as the placebo effect.) We learn that many years later King Hezekiah destroyed this very pole when the people began to worship it in addition to worshiping Yahweh as if the symbol of healing held the power. The healing came from God, a “divine condescension,” says Wrenn. Using something they could understand, that was culturally relevant. “Divine condescension.” Wrenn says we would know this as *grace*.[[3]](#endnote-3)

There is an interesting thing going on with the Hebrew in this story. The snakess that appear among the camp, bringing death with their bites, are nâchâsh. God, however, tells Moses to create a fiery serpent, or Sârâph. If that last word sounds familiar it is because it is the same word, seraph or seraphim, as in an angelic being. You may also know the passage from Isaiah 6 in which the seraphim (six winged, coppery colored creatures) take a burning coal and touch it to the prophet’s lips as an act of purification. These seraphim, like the God they serve, are not tame creatures. Fiery, burning, purifying. For whatever reason, Moses makes anâchâsh rather than a Sârâph…maybe he didn’t have any idea how to capture that mystery of what a seraph looked like. He knew what a snake looked like, so he made that. But the people are healed, rescued, restored. By God. In a way that they could understand. That part sounds familiar, doesn’t it? That God would love us in a way that we could understand.

And so Jesus reminds Nicodemus of this story and then adds a parallel – that he will be lifted up. The Hebrew people faced their fear, staring down the serpent, and receiving God’s healing.

How does this translate? We can’t make a direct corollary – we certainly don’t want to overlay an image of a serpent on a pole over the image of Jesus on a cross…

But there is something here about gazing upon that which frightens us.

When we look at the cross, we are looking at the image of a device of execution, a device used for punishment, for humiliation, for torture.

When we look at the cross, we are reminded of all the brokenness of the world, not just in Jesus’ day, but before that and after that…all the brokenness.

When we look at the cross upon which Jesus was hung, we are looking at a broken system, a community that neither understood nor accepted the vision which Jesus sought to introduce. A realm of peace, a community of justice and hope. So they executed him.

What does it mean for us to look at that which causes us pain? In our own lives and in our life as community?

Like if you visit the Memorial in Montgomery? To all those lives lost to lynching? To look at that pain is the beginning of healing. So we acknowledge our sins just as the Hebrew people acknowledged theirs. We have to name our place in the brokenness of our communities.

Jesus doesn’t want us to stop there. God didn’t want the Hebrew people to stop there, just gazing at a snake on a pole. God wanted them to be healed. Jesus invites us to look beyond what harmed him, what harms us, to see the love that transforms that brokenness. The love that is stronger than death.

He speaks to Nicodemus of eternal life. And we have narrowed that down and lost its real meaning. We talk of it as something that happens after our journey on this earth is over. But the idea of eternal life is so much more expansive than that. In its original form it’s a time that transforms, it’s the time before and the time ahead and the time beside us. It’s the hour we lost last night and the hour we will regain in the fall. Eternal life is so much more than what awaits us. It is the now of living. The now of living in a radical way. Part of that radical living is being able to look at the pain.

As kid president said the biggest mistake is not forgiving all the mess ups. That’s where God invites us. To go beyond that place, but not forgetting.

A forgiveness that grants us eternal life in this very moment.

We acknowledge our sins, just as the Hebrew people acknowledged theirs, wondering if we would be part of that community that would place Jesus on a cross.

But Jesus invites us to look beyond that which would harm us to see the one whose love transforms it, transforms death into life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Holy Envy*, Harper One; NY, NY; 2020. p. 169. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Wrenn, Tim, First Reading podcast, [First Reading - The Old Testament Lectionary Podcast (firstreadingpodcast.com)](https://firstreadingpodcast.com/), 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid.

   Additional sources consulted:

   [Of Snakes and Things: Lectionary Reflections on Numbers 21:4-9 (patheos.com)](https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/of-snakes-and-things-john-c-holbert-03-10-2015.html)

   [4 Lent – Year B | preachingtip](https://preachingtip.com/archives-year-b/lent-year-b/4-lent-year-b/)

   Feasting on the Word, Year, B

   Connections, Year B [↑](#endnote-ref-3)