

Rev. Beth J. Costlow

Lent 4 Year B

Numbers 24:4-9; John 3:14-21

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- We have to start with Numbers
 - Israelites had been in the wilderness for a long time and were cranky.
 - They “spoke against God and against Moses.”
 - “We’re going to die! “There’s not enough food!” (Patently false, as both manna and quail were abundant.) And then, like a whiny toddler, “OK, there’s food but we don’t like it!”
 - God’s response? Snakes. Poisonous snakes! And death, lots of death.
 - People repent, and beg Moses to fix things with God.
 - Moses prays. God offers a fix.
 - “Take one of those snakes and put it on a pole where everyone can see it. Anyone who is bitten can save their life by looking at it.
 - It worked!
- This is the story referenced in the opening verse of today’s Gospel lesson, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up,…”
 - “It is necessary,” translation difference from the NRSV; this is what Biblical scholars call the “divine passive”—God is doing the work.
 - And then, “that whoever has faith in him may have eternal life.”
 - The serpent on the stick saved the Israelites from death.
 - The whining, complaining, grumbling Israelites who would have died from the snakebite will live. They experience healing.
 - But they will still face the grave. And that (Sheol) will be their end.
- In Jesus, God is doing a new thing. So let’s talk about Jesus’ death.
 - Twenty-first century Christians aren’t nearly as shocked by it as those who surrounded Jesus in the first century.
 - Remember what I told you last week about the expected Messiah—king, warrior, political power.
 - No one expected the Messiah to suffer. No one expect the Messiah to provide the kind of freedom that comes from death.
 - Instead, everyone expected the Messiah to free them from political oppression, defeat all governments who had kept them oppressed, and

claim his own power as king and leader. They expected the Messiah to embody God's wrath.

- Jesus, of course, comes as a different kind of Messiah. And he brings a different form of salvation.
 - More than that, though, he brings a completely different image of God's love.
 - Israelites and their descendants—the Judeans—were God's chosen people. They were, if you will, the favored children.
 - Didn't God save the Israelites countless times in the OT? Today's lesson about the serpent on the stick is just one of many!
 - God is bigger than you think, says Jesus, according to the author of this gospel.
 - The serpent on the stick saved the Israelites. The Savior on a cross will save the world.
 - It is a gift *also* for the Israelites. But not *only* for them.
- “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. 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.”
 - Make no mistake: These two verses are inextricably tied together!
 - Because of the Savior on a cross, we know that the grave is not the end. Eternal life lies ahead.
 - What does that look like? Truth: We don't know. What we do know: Grace and mercy.
 - “Condemn” vs. “Judge”
 - The word translated condemn is better judge. The Son did not come to judge the world (yet! That does lie ahead!) but to save it.
- And then comes a couple of verses with circular arguments about who gets judged/condemned. I wrestled with these for hours and decided that it was easiest for me to explain them by proclaiming that God's judgment is always about mercy. Jesus' cross is mercy for humanity. Jesus' cross is mercy for the world.
 - Regardless of our human deeds, this is God's deed: God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but to save it. To save us.
 - Amen.