



Meditation for the Fourth Sunday in Lent March 14, 2021

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. [Numbers 21.9]

The Book of Numbers tells the story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for forty years. The story of the bronze serpent that we read today presents a situation that occurs over and over again during the wandering and it crystallizes perfectly the pain of wandering that we all experience in the wilderness times of our lives: The people become impatient and frustrated, consumed with self-pity. When they complain, God sends hardship—in this case “poisonous” or “fiery” serpents who cause widespread suffering and death. In response, the people repent, Moses intercedes for them, and God provides the means of healing: Moses makes a bronze serpent, and when people look upon it they will be healed from the serpent’s bite.

Over and over again the Israelites are taught to depend upon God’s mercy. Therein lies their strength and their freedom. Freedom does not mean that life is easy: It means that life is larger and more complex than we had understood it to be. It means that awe may fear and hope may replace resentment. It allows us to say *Look up! Grace is everywhere!*

The serpents described in this story are not simply garden snakes, nor are they the larger poisonous snakes that we associate with northern climates. Scholars now believe that they are what we call the “Guinea worm,” a parasite that has persisted in Africa to the present day. The larvae of the worm are found in fleas that in turn are in stagnant water; they are ingested when people drink water, and within the body they mate; the male worm dies and is excreted, but the female grows to be about a yard long, the size and texture of a strand of spaghetti. After lying dormant in the body, the worm erupts from the feet or hands, sometimes from the breast or eye socket, breaking through the skin by exuding acid under the skin until it bubbles and bursts. The pain of the eruption is like fire shooting through the body. When the pain drives a person to plunge the blisters into a pool of water, the worm squirts out a milky cloud of larvae and the cycle begins again; hence, people can be infected with the worms over and over again throughout their lives. The only treatment once a person has been infected is to help with the excretion of the worm by carefully pulling it out, bit by bit, and bandaging the site to prevent infection.

So the Israelites were afflicted over and over again because of drinking polluted water. And yet God does not purify the water they drink or remove the poisonous serpents or fleas, nor does Moses offer a magic potion. Their healing requires telling each other *Look up! Grace is everywhere!* They will be healed when they trust in the abiding mercy of God: Letting go of self-sufficiency and guilt, enduring the pain of self-revelation without resorting to self-medication. We will be healed when we accept the vulnerability and strength comes with authentic relationships, when we trust in God’s ever-present grace, and most of all when we help each other overcome our suffering.

Steven Charleston puts it well:

I know a place where fear and uncertainty cannot come, where confidence and hope still shine brightly, where there is room for every person of every condition to gather in safety and strength. That place is in my heart. The princes of power who strut their moment upon the stage may rail against the others—the many others—they seek to shun from the embrace of freedom. But in my heart is sanctuary for each forgotten soul. No truth will be swept away; no justice lost, no mercy gone ungiven, for I keep them all here in my heart. There they are secure until once more they are released to join what I know is in your heart as well: an outpouring of love.

[*Ladder to the Light*, pp. 58-59]