

CRUCIFIX OR CROSS?
The Fourth Sunday in Lent
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Is it just me, or does our reading from Numbers strike you as very strange and unfamiliar? We do hear it every three years, but it is odd and a bit jarring for me every time – I forget that it's even there.

Let's remind ourselves of what is going on here. The people of Israel are complaining to Moses, yet again, about their situation in the wilderness. They are suggesting that they preferred their lives as slaves in Egypt and are complaining about having to eat manna, the food provided for them in the wilderness. God sends a plague of poisonous snakes (or serpents, as they are called here), and many Israelites die. The people come again to Moses, confess their sin of "speaking against the Lord and against you" (Numbers 4:7) and ask Moses to pray to have the serpents taken away.

The Lord answers the prayer in an interesting way. He does not remove the serpents; instead, he instructs Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole where the whole community can see it. The snakes remain, and people continue to be bitten, but when they look at the bronze serpent on the pole, they live.

Strange story, right? There is definitely an echo in the story of snake magic, an ancient practice from before the time when Israel came into covenant with Yahweh. Notice that the people only "look at" the bronze serpent (Numbers 21:8,9) – they don't handle it or worship it, which they would have done in the days of magical practice. But the bronze serpent does function as a totem, with a very specific spiritual power.

Notice, however, that the snakes remain. Here we have a very clear, Yahwistic theology. There are continuing consequences for sin. The pain and suffering of living with the snakes is still a part of the community's life. The Lord is teaching the people of Israel what it means to be the People of God during their time in the wilderness. He demands their obedience and the consequences of disobedience don't just magically disappear. In His mercy, though, the Lord softens those consequences and continues in covenant with His people.

As strange as it seems, though, it was not only the learning about obedience that was carried forward in the story of the Jewish people. (In fact, the learning about obedience was often forgotten!) That bronze serpent became a fixture in the Temple in Jerusalem, where people made offerings to it, treating it as an object of devotion. In the Second Book of Kings, we read about the young king Hezekiah, who cut down the pole on which the serpent was mounted and broke it into pieces, thereby cleansing the Temple of what had become an idolatrous image. (2 Kings 18:4)

And still the Jewish people remembered the story of the bronze serpent, so much so that we find it in our Gospel lesson today: "And 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." (John 3:14-15)

Remarkably, Jesus chooses this image to describe what will happen to him: he will be *lifted up*, first on a cross, and then again into heaven.

It seems that somehow this very foreign, uncomfortable image, one step removed from ancient folk magic, was so strongly imprinted in the minds of the Jewish people that Jesus himself chose it to describe his own calling. Again: it's strange. And yet, when we step back from it, is the bronze serpent a stranger spiritual symbol than the crucifix itself?

When I was a boy, the sad truth is that there was still quite a bit of distrust and even acrimony between Protestants and Catholics. I often overheard adults speaking disparagingly about the use of crucifixes in Catholic churches. Later, I learned that my best friend, a Catholic boy, had been taught to cross the street if he had to pass in front of a Protestant church. Thankfully, we made a lot of progress on this as teenagers, when my friend joined the youth group at our church and I became familiar with the beauty of the Mass.

Much later still, I found our own Episcopal tradition, in which crucifixes and empty crosses are both parts of our devotional and worship lives, some churches giving more focus to one, some to the other. And I think that today's Gospel tells us that this is right. Jesus is lifted up twice, and we must give our full attention to both occurrences: his lifting up to death on the Cross, and his lifting up to heaven, leaving an empty Cross as a symbol of His miraculous Resurrection and Ascension. I think that the symbol of the bronze serpent stayed with the Jewish people for the very reason that God first had Moses make it: because they understood that they still lived in a world full of toxicity and sin and that God was with them in the midst of this. And of course, Jesus on the Cross is the ultimate symbol of the truth of this. Sin is real. Pandemics are real. Climate change is real. Racism is real. God doesn't make them go away. But God companions us, and suffers with us, as we confront the truth about our world.

We confront that truth, though, mindful of another image, stunning in its simplicity and in the story it tells: the empty Cross. The empty Cross holds out the promise that somehow, in a way that is beyond our understanding, sin is not the end of the story. The intractability of our human problems, the poisonous snakes that crawl everywhere, somehow – somehow – will be redeemed and replaced by the One who was present at Creation and will bring about a New Creation.

Crucifix and Cross. We need both: the first, to remind us that the terrible deeds of which we humans are capable extended to the execution of God's own Son, who embraced the suffering of the Cross and journeys with us through the wilderness we have made for ourselves; and the second, to point us to a power so great that it can, and will, redeem even this wilderness – somehow.