

Divergence on the Lectionary - Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B

First Reading

Numbers 21:4–9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And 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 loathe this worthless food.” Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. (ESV)

Second Reading

Ephesians 2:1–10

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 3:14–21

And 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.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to *judge* the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not *judged*, but whoever does not believe is *judged in this moment*, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

There are a few different ways to approach this text from Numbers, so I'm going to try to give some space to a few of them. That may mean I'll give short shrift to all of them to some degree, but here goes.

From the time of Justin Martyr this image of the snakes lifted up by Moses for the healing of people bitten by the snakes has been read as a type, an anticipation of Jesus on the Cross. That we might look on Him whom we have slain and find salvation is somewhat akin to the way the Israelites were encouraged to look upon the snakes. I will come back to that in a moment.

What really fascinates me about this passage is that God, who had earlier in Genesis absolutely forbidden the creation of any graven image, here commands Moses to do just that, create a graven image. This raises all sorts of questions about why. Some commentators view this as a minor “exception” to the second commandment, but the risk involved in this exception is great, as evidenced by the fact that later Hezekiah destroys this image of the snakes because the Israelites have been, for some time, burning incense to the image. I do think there's something worth exploring here. Something given for the good of the people becomes twisted into something idolatrous, something that brings harm.

The use of snake images by YHWH in this story seems to contradict the commandment against the creation of images, but only if we disregard the second half of the commandment. “You shall not bow down to them or worship them.” In this case God

confers no deity on the cast bronze. The image is only a reminder of God's mercy, never a small "g" god in itself. That its function changes over time doesn't diminish that reality. This is the place where I think the link to Jesus on the Cross is strongest. That is, God uses an image of what the people deserve for their unfaithfulness (death by the snakes) as a sign of what God forgoes in Their mercy. Similarly, Jesus on the Cross is an image of what our sin has brought us (death), but also a sign of the mercy that spares us from it.

There remains one other angle from which to view this story. In the world around the Israelites the use of snake imagery was common in other religions. One commentator I read suggested that God's use of the snakes to heal is also a demonstration of the way that God can take what is idolatrous in another setting and bend it to Their gracious will, making it a symbol of healing.

In the end, though, I keep coming back to the way that this gift from YHWH for the healing of the people becomes twisted into an object of idolatrous worship. While I don't think this is true everywhere, I do find a sad parallel in the way that the Bible has been twisted into something equally idolatrous in some parts of Christianity. Take that for whatever it might be worth.

Second Reading

There are so many elements in this reading that I'd like to comment on that I just can't do it all in this one week's Divergence. I'll tackle a few of them and hope that when this lesson rolls around again in three years I'll still be sharp enough to take on some more.

I begin by pointing to our first word, "and." If ever there were an indicator that this passage is the continuation of one that came before it, this is it. It follows immediately after Paul's prayers for the Ephesians that conclude chapter one.

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all

things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:15–23, ESV)

Only at the conclusion of that do we read...

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind,”

and the rest of our text for this Sunday.

I have written on that earlier passage from chapter one of Ephesians in the Divergence for Ascension Day, Year A. (LINK) I won't try to summarize that, only say that it is one of my favorite passages in all the Bible. Our reading for this week comes immediately after it and while it might at first feel like Paul is almost canceling out the glory of his earlier words I find that he is instead heightening their impact by pointing out their (our) starting place. That such glory should be ours, given that we began as “children of wrath,” well, that just makes God all the more astonishing.

Then Paul goes on to speak of what God *has done* for us in Christ. Because of God's great love and mercy (see the serpent above and the Cross below) we have already been “made alive together with Christ” and “seated with Him in heavenly places.”

It is difficult not to rush into “saved by grace through faith” but I'm going to leave that aside for this Divergence and focus on those two realities. I think that either of the above images is worth stopping for, resting in. We are, I am, “made alive together with Christ.” How could I possibly overstate the enormity of that truth? I am living *right now* the life that the Son lives with the Father. I could ponder that for decades and never mine the smallest fraction of the wealth those words convey.

And we are, I am, “seated with Him in heavenly places.” I have always tended toward what some call “striving.” Trying too hard to accomplish things. Trying to run through brick walls as though breaking through them would lead to greater freedom. And here Paul is saying, “Jeff, slow down and take a look at where you already are, seated with Christ in heavenly places.” If I can keep that reality in front of me, so much of what I do becomes less stressful. Not just because I am already on the other side of that brick wall, but also because those for whom I often strive are also.

It is a strange thing, contemplating this, because while I am no longer as stressed because I know the truth of where I am, where they are, I am also so much more desperate to help others to come to know where they are, to know the beauty of it, the freedom of it. I am all the more vulnerable to the pain of those who do not know and yet that pain does not grind me down as it might have if I were still “striving” so hard.

I could probably spend the rest of my life meditating on Ephesians.

Gospel Text

Small wonder that Justin Martyr took the staff of Moses and its snakes as a type of the Cross to come. Jesus hints at the same in our reading from John. Here in the Fourth Sunday in Lent, where we’re given a bit of a break from the contemplation of our sin and the lessons focus instead on God’s mercy, Jesus sets our eyes on the Cross, the manifestation of that mercy, the hub that holds all of Creation together as it turns.

I did change one word in the translation above. I substituted “judge” for “condemn” in each of its three occurrences in the ESV. Those of you who hear the NRSV read in church on Sunday will likely hear “condemned” also. The Greek verb *krino* can mean “condemn” but it almost every other occurrence in the New Testament our translators agree that it should read “judge.” Many other translations are more consistent here, so I’m not alone in preferring this word.

I have also changed “already” to “in this moment.” The Greek adverb *ede* carries a sense of “now,” of immediacy that “already” lacks because “already” sounds done, finished. It infers something past with present result, not “now.”

I make these small changes because I want to draw our attention to our own tendency to turn the One who has come *not* to judge into the one who condemns those who “have loved darkness rather than light because of their evil works.” I don’t think that Jesus means to contradict Himself here. I’m going to try to write out what I think Jesus is saying in a way that is consistent with a God who so loves the broken “world” that They gave Their Son to be crucified.

And this is the truth of the way things are (the judgment, present, immediate). The light has come into the world, the light that illumines the profligate mercy of God, and some see this mercy and turn to it while others, because of the shame of what they’ve done, what they do, (their evil works) do not (yet) have the courage to step into that light and bathe in glorious mercy.

John's Gospel is accused by some commentators being somewhat gnostic in its division of the world into categories of darkness and light. What these commentators fail to recognize is that hovering over all the darkness and light in John is the Cross, which shines into every crevice of Creation. There are those who see this truth and live in it, and there are those whose eyes are not yet opened, who still live as though darkness still has a foothold. But Jesus has come to save "the world," not just the pretty parts of it, and the light of the Cross shines through our best attempts at finding shadow. That there are some "now" who live as though darkness still holds some shred of hegemony is a present reality but it is bleached in the eternal light of the Cross.

Oh, my, have I rambled. I hope I haven't made a helpless hash of everything.