

Up on a Stick

Anyone living in the Midwest and having gone to the State Fairs, it is easy to make the connection between the bronze serpent on the pole that Moses made following God's instructions and the name "Snake on a Stick." At the State Fair, you can find almost any kind of food. Most of these foods are put on a stick for easier eating in a Fair environment. Before a State Fair opens, the local TV news programs will feature the newest foods on a stick to be offered that year at the fair. Many times, the combinations of foods being put on a stick and then deep fried do not make sense. For example, not many people would think to put a Snickers bar on a stick and then deep fry it, but people say that it does taste good. However, when one compares a snack on a stick from a state fair to the snake on a stick that Moses was instructed to make in the reading from the Book of Numbers, one sees that the snack on a stick does not lead to life, although the momentary taste pleasure is worth it; while Moses' snake on a stick gave life to the Israelites who were bitten by the poisonous serpents.

The story of the serpents among the Israelites almost seems like it is a story that is just inserted in the book of Numbers. The stories around this passage have to do with the travels of the Israelites during the Exodus, some of the battles they fought and the death of Aaron. It certainly does not seem to present either the Israelites or God in a very favorable light. The Israelites are murmuring again, not liking the food that God has given them or appreciating the battle victories. God seems intent on punishing the Israelites with a punishment that seems far worse than was necessary. Not only that but if we recall the Ten Commandments that God, Himself, gave the Israelites, graven images were forbidden. So, what is God doing here? Is He trying to trick the people that if they looked at the bronze serpent then they would be punished for worshipping an idol, putting them in a catch 22? Why couldn't God just take the snakes away since God sent them in the first place? Just

on the face of it, this story is quite perplexing. However, when we look a little deeper behind the story, we can get a glimpse of what God is up to.

The Israelites were unhappy with just eating manna every day. They had murmured several other times about their plight in the wilderness. They had complained that they didn't have anything to eat, then they didn't have any meat and that they didn't have any water. While in these times God provided them with manna, quail and water, perhaps the Israelites still did not appreciate all that God had given them. Perhaps by having the snake on the pole, that forced the people to look up and hopefully past the bronze snake to the heavens and remember that it was actually God who gave them healing, not the snake. They would also remember that it was God who told Moses to make the bronze snake, thus again reminding the people that God is the source, the power behind the snake on a stick.

Jesus referred to this Exodus incident in today's Gospel passage. But before we get into that, we should put this Gospel text within the context of where we find this passage. Jesus is having a conversation with Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to Jesus during the night to talk with Jesus. At first take, it might seem as if Nicodemus is sneaking around and talking with Jesus at night so that his fellow Pharisees would not see him talking with this outsider. However, since most Pharisees worked at jobs during the day (recall that Paul was a tentmaker as well as a Pharisee before his conversion), it was normal for Pharisees to study at nighttime. Therefore, we cannot definitely say whether Nicodemus had any covert intentions on talking with Jesus. The first part of their conversation centered around Jesus speaking of the need to be born of the Spirit, which Nicodemus heard as Jesus saying that we must be born again. Knowing that Nicodemus had missed the point that Jesus was making by hearing Jesus on a literal level, Jesus gives him an example with which he would be familiar. He is telling us that just like the cure for snakes is another snake, the cure

for human life is another man's life. But just like it could not be just any snake, it had to be the snake that God "authorized," this man could not be just any man, He had to be sent by God. Many times, we think that any "snake on a stick" would do, so we construct or turn to any idol thinking that it would get us what we desire. We know about the obvious idols of alcohol, drugs, houses, jobs, bank accounts, toys and the like. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that we should abstain from all of these things. It is when we become obsessed with these things to the point that we only focus our efforts on getting them that they become idols. But there are more things which we have made into idols which originally were not idols. For example, when we say that a person can only receive salvation if they believed a certain way, we are making an idol of that belief system. While the Israelites of the Exodus were saved from dying by snake bites by looking at a snake on a pole, it was a snake on a stick which God directed Moses to make. Just as Moses lifted that snake on a stick for the people to raise their glances and see the source of that snake; Jesus is saying that for the people to be saved from themselves, from the debt that we could not repay for ourselves, then they, we, must look up to a man who was put up on a stick, a man of God's choosing.

We have tried to put many things of our choosing up on that stick, whether it was a person or a belief system or an economic system or a governing system. Sooner or later, each one of these idols on a stick come crashing down, not being able to deliver what was promises, what was hoped for; leaving us wondering what went wrong when it they cannot do what we thought they could.

We should touch on the troubling verse in the Gospel reading where Jesus says, "Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God." It may seem that if anyone does not believe, then they cannot be saved. From

this, we could conclude that even those who never heard about Jesus cannot be saved. However, we cannot read this into this text, because Jesus had just said that God wants to save the world with the only qualifier being that a person believes in Jesus. However, in this troubling verse, Jesus is actually talking about those who know about Jesus, yet refuse to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior, the Deliverer of the world. This does not mean that if you have a doubt, then you cannot be a believer. Doubt can be good, it can push us into a deeper understanding of Jesus and God. On the other hand, it could push us away from God, turning our belief in Jesus into unbelief. It is this unbelief, this untrusting, that results in our turning away from Jesus, rejecting the promises Jesus gives us.

Why would this text be part of our Lenten journey, especially at the halfway point of Lent? Perhaps it reminds us that God loves us and wants the best for us - to be saved, not to be judged and condemned. It would also remind us to look past the 'snake on a stick' and remember the source of all our healing, that we are also to look past the cross to which Jesus and we are headed and to look to God as the source of life. This text allows us to see a glimpse of what is at the end, giving us the encouragement and resolution to keep going to the end. At the end is not just the cross but the glory of God.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/LDDeim6d-8Y>

Service: <https://youtu.be/U1jcDVpdnbl>