

## What gets lifted up?

The episode or event which is described in the book of Numbers and then is brought to the forefront by Jesus in this conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus in John's gospel has been one of the most challenging passages in this lectionary reading on many levels. The connections between the passages for those who put together the lectionary readings are obvious...but what could have been the deeper connections and associations for the writer of John's gospel narrative of Jesus' ministry? Or what more importantly...what could have been the connection for our Lord who was well versed in the texts describing the wilderness experiences of his ancestors which had been handed down? The visit of Nicodemus to Jesus itself provides many images for John's themes of light and darkness which are raised up throughout the narrative. Nicodemus as a Pharisee is a leader of the religious institution...the establishment of the faith tradition of Jesus which opposes Jesus' ministry. For John's narrative it is important that he comes to visit Jesus at night...not openly recognizing Jesus as a teacher or bearer of God's word. Nicodemus is the one trained in the aspects of the Law which are being observed and supported by the Temple and tradition. Yet in this visit he seems to recognize and be open to the idea that Jesus is bringing a word...a teaching or message from God. At this point John's gospel the narrative has not recorded any of what John calls the "signs" of Jesus' identify, but Nicodemus refers to knowing of "signs which Jesus does which no one can do apart from the presence of God". So on this basis, he has come to visit Jesus. Jesus' response is to tell him that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. But Nicodemus does not understand this remark...and like his visit...his understanding is in the dark. And Jesus' explanation which follows about being born of the spirit seems to only confuse Nicodemus more. Nicodemus's response is to wonder: "Can someone enter a second time into the womb of his mother and be born?" Jesus' response is: "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony." Their exchange continues with Jesus telling Nicodemus: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." After this exchange Nicodemus remains unenlightened about what Jesus' teachings are about; the teachings that he has been proclaiming about the nearness of God's reign and what citizenship in God's kingdom looks like. This citizenship in God reign that Jesus proclaims calls for the people to repent and change their ways. In John's gospel, this changing of ways which has just caused Jesus to enter the temple courtyard to overturn the money changers tables and chase the sellers of animals for sacrifice from the Temple courtyard for turning the Father's house of prayer into a marketplace. This is behavior which the Pharisees and priests have allowed in the Temple courtyard. The lectionary by not including the entire story of this nocturnal visit of Nicodemus have disconnected the context for understanding the reference to the Numbers passage. In the conversation Jesus has with Nicodemus, he points out that the religious authorities have rejected the teachings he has brought about the need for repentance, the need for changing their ways into living out the covenant community vows of caring and trust which are the signs of citizenship in God's kingdom. Living into these things, show the presence of God's spirit in the community...and Nicodemus does not see or understand this. He remains in the dark. It is the rejection of Jesus' teachings, especially about the need for repentance that makes the connection to the events which are recorded in the Numbers passage. The events which are recorded in Numbers 21

happen near the end of the wilderness journey. The people have long ago left Mount Sinai, they have been provided manna and water for their journey as the Lord has tried to mold them into the people of the covenant. Yet they persist in being rebellious, complaining that the Lord has not freed them but has just brought them out into the wilderness to die. What triggers the response of God is that after all this time, the people have spent about 38 years in the wilderness, benefiting from God's numerous acts of grace, yet here they are again rejecting that grace. This is a reminder that rejecting God's grace definitely will have consequences. There is a great deal of wisdom in the narration of the events which follow God's sending of the serpents. Numbers 21:6 states: "Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people so that many Israelites died." What happens next is this: "The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.'" Note that the people ask for the serpents to be sent away. Moses again goes and intercedes praying for the people. What happened was that the people did not get exactly what they asked. There is a world of gospel wisdom in the ending to the story. Why? Because simply taking away the serpents would leave the people stuck in their sins. Moses was instructed to make a bronze serpent to be put on a pole so that whenever someone was bitten they could look at it and then live. Instead of changing their situation, sending the serpents away, which was all Israel wanted, would not accomplish what Israel needed. God knew they needed to be changed in themselves. The bronze serpent came to represent their sin; their sin in complaining against the Lord which was a sign of their lack of trust. When they sinned they were to face their sin; facing their sin meant acknowledging it, and turning away from it trusting that in facing it they would live. The bronze serpent provided them a visual, physical means for that acknowledgement of their repentance and the way to receive God's gift of mercy. In doing this, God did not just get rid of the serpents but provided a way for those who trusted in what Moses told them God had provided for them, a way of healing for their sin...to be healed. Those who responded by looking at the bronze serpent were healed and lived because they trusted. These people who had rejected God's amazing grace needed to learn to accept it again. They had turned away from the God who had saved them in multiple ways. The snakes remained so they would learn to look at The Snake on a pole. The snakes weren't really the main problem; their rejection of God's grace was. That way leads to death of the worst sort. So, Moses calls them to accept God's grace by believing the Word of God at looking at the Snake on a pole which is lifted up for them to see...and they will live. This lifting up of the symbol of the consequence of their sin, the rejection of God's grace, then helps us to understand the connection made in John's gospel. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that it is the rejection of the news of God's kingdom that he is bringing that will mean that the Son of Man must be lift up. At this point, even a blind person begins to see the connection to the gospel message here. But because we often are blind, Jesus makes it perfectly clear in John 3: 14-15 where he compares himself to this Serpent. That tells us that this whole story, especially the most unpleasant part, is about the love of God for the world. God takes the world so seriously that God must respond strongly to sin. Our lives depend upon it. If God simply lets us go on in our unbelief, there is nothing but "perishing" in our future; for the consequence of rejection of God's grace is death. So God intervenes in many ways, some frightening, some strange, but all based in such amazing love that we stand in awe. We may wonder why God choose a snake to cure a snake bite. The answer, I suspect, lies in the story of

Jesus, who was made just like us sinners, except he never sinned. Paul put it even stronger when he said in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:21, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus declares to Nicodemus his mission in what is one of the best known and most loved verses of our scriptures: "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." It is the rejection of God's grace; it is the rejection of God's ways; these are the things which bring darkness and brokenness into our world. The rejections of Jesus' message that God's reign was near led to the raising of the cross on that hill outside of Jerusalem's gates. However, those rejections did not have the last word. Because what was lifted up on that cross was a love so amazing that we will never truly grasp it, we can only lift our thanks and praise and accept it for the blessing and gift it is. What was lifted up on the cross was God's love for the world which has provided for our redemption. Thanks be to God.