



Sermon on Numbers 21:4–9

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This sermon on Numbers 21:4–9 was delivered at the March 6, 2024 chapel service at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

I went to my first Rolling Stones concert when I was fourteen years old—with my parents and my eight-year-old brother at Legion Field in Birmingham, Alabama. It was the Voodoo Lounge tour. Counting Crows was the opening act. My parents are educators, and I can affirm that that concert was very, very educational for me—in that eye-opening-life-experience sort of way. And it was a *spectacular* concert. The Rolling Stones always put on such a magnificent show. There was only one disappointment: their setlist that night did not include “You Can’t Always Get What You Want.” Ironic, I know: I did not get

“You can’t always get what you want...” This refrain from the Rolling Stones is surprisingly helpful in understanding the wild and bizarre story of the snake infestation found in Numbers 21:4–9. We do not always get what we want; we can’t avoid suffering, but that doesn’t mean that we are without hope.

what I wanted, which was to hear a song about how you can't always get what you want. If you're familiar with this song, you know it starts off with a choral opening, sounding like something you might hear in church. London's Bach Choir performs on the original 1968 recording, singing the chorus: "You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need."

I think that chorus is a reasonable summation of the Israelites' experience wandering in the wilderness for forty years. They rarely get what they want, but they sometimes find they get what they need. Such is the case in our story this morning. And before I go any further let me acknowledge that any way you slice it, this is a weird and disturbing story. When an infestation of poisonous snakes brings illness and death to the Israelites' camp, they ask Moses to pray to God on their behalf: "Pray to the LORD," they plead, "so that God will send the snakes away from us" (Num 21:7). So, Moses prays. But the people do not get what they want. God does not send the snakes away.

Instead, at God's prompting, Moses makes a bronze serpent and puts it up on a pole, and when people are bitten by snakes, they can look upon the snake and be healed. And they do continue to be bitten, because God does not send the snakes away. The people are not promised that they can avoid their suffering, but they are promised the possibility to be healed from it. It's a promise of hope. The snake on the pole is a sign of hope.

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When my daughter was an infant, she had an unclosed space in her heart between her aorta and pulmonary artery that, unbeknownst to her doctors, was so unexpectedly big that her heart was pumping three times the volume of blood as it should need to. And so until she had a surgical procedure to close that hole when she was eight months old, she was nursing every two hours and never gaining much weight, because her little body was using so many calories to do all that extra pumping.

For so long I was so desperately tired, getting up multiple times a night, feeding her and praying we could both get a little more sleep, and not knowing why this was happening or when it would stop. I remember many nights praying, pleading with God, “Why don’t you let me sleep? Why are you torturing me?” It sounds irrational when I say it now, but at the time I meant it, every word of it, every time. There’s nothing like physical pain to crowd out all those years of careful theological training. All those nuanced articulations of theodicy or full-throated professions of faith give way to desperate pleading from deep within our bodies: Why have you forsaken me? Why did you bring us from Egypt to kill us in the desert? Why won’t you just send the snakes away?

With these questions—these hard, possibly unanswerable questions rising from our moments of deepest desperation—our sermon has arrived at a fork in the road, or rather, at the meeting point of at least three different paths: different ways of reckoning with the power, justice, and love of God. Down one path is a sermon of dangerous platitudes: that God doesn’t give us more than we can handle; that God, through our suffering, will consume the dross of our faith and leave only the refined gold; that God is working God’s purpose out; that human suffering is fulfilling God’s greater design for the world. A sermon like that implies God’s relationship with us is one of sadistic power. I’m not going to preach that sermon.

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Down another path is a sermon that says God doesn’t stop our suffering but that God is “with us” in our suffering. God loves us, walks beside us, and accompanies us through the trials and terrors of life. That is a good and important sermon, full of truth, but I’m not going to preach that one today, either. Because our weird and disturbing text from Numbers asks us to take a different angle of vision on the divine. If we do not ever preach hard texts like this one, then we risk forgetting that the biblical witness tells us of a God who fashioned the pillars of creation and “crushed the heads of Leviathan” (Ps 74:14). We

risk forgetting that we believe in a fearsomely powerful God—a God powerful enough to raise a crucified man from the dead. As the Rev. Dr. King wrote, “...love without power is sentimental and anemic.”¹ When we fail to remember scripture’s testimony to God’s just and loving power, we risk diluting our understanding of God’s love to mere sentimentality.

So I am, with some trepidation, taking the third path. Down this path is a sermon that does two things: it acknowledges God’s freedom, and it calls God to account. Why doesn’t God send the snakes away? Who knows? God is God, and God is free to do whatever God will do. But we are witnesses to what God has done in the past. We have watched as God, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, piled up the waters of sea so that the Israelites could walk through on dry ground, and then closed the waters back over their oppressors. We have seen God split open rocks in the desert, water pouring out of them. We have heard how God laid the foundations of the earth, “cut[ting] a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt” (Job 38:25). We testify that God has the power to change our situations: to heal, to correct, to relent; to take away the snakes; to transform the swords into plowshares; to cast down the mighty from their thrones.

We testify that God seeks justice. We testify that God acts for the world in love. *We* must not forget that, and we cannot let *God* forget that. The psalmists do not let God forget that. The prophets do not let God forget that. In biblical prayer, *remembering* is *petitioning*: God did it before, and God can do it again. Our tradition testifies to a God who makes a way out of no way—not a God who flexes sadistic power, not a God who dissolves into a weak sentimentality. This is not a God who withers under our questions, or discounts our desperate pleading. Ours is a God who is responsive to humanity: who answers prayer.

We know the answers to our prayers are rarely what we want them to be, or even what we need them to be. We know healing is not always provided. We know peace is elusive. We know our hearts are broken every day, sometimes our bodies, too. But we also know that everywhere we turn we can see reminders of our hope: Hope that the

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Chicago: Beacon Press, [1967] 2010), 38.

God who showed up for our ancestors in the faith will show up for us here and now, again and again, in power, justice, and love. Amen. ☩

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