

Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 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 detest this miserable food.' Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 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.' So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3:14-17

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Humanity be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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.

Our Lenten journey of healing this morning takes us into the realm of mental health. For all those who struggle with mental health, which I would suggest is all of us, we never get healed from those things which impinge upon our mental well being. We may do fine for season or two, but the specter of descent is ever present. The incarnation of God in Christ took place, in part, to help us better navigate a good path. Healing might not be fully realized, but there can be restoration and repair.¹ The tides will come and go. I offer a personal experience from the past week which will help frame my reflections on the biblical texts of this day.

¹ Note the differentiation between healing, restoration and repair in Cole Arthur Riley's, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us* (New York: Convergent Books, 2022).

Winter is a challenging time for all who walk or run to maintain our mental health. It is dark. There is snow. There is ice beneath the snow. I find myself looking down more than up in such conditions. Sometimes I even miss the wonders of night, dawn, day, or dusk out of concern for my footing. Looking down affects my posture. Looking down affects the muscles I am utilizing to walk. Looking down is less satisfying. The invitation we have in both Numbers and John is to look up. As I was shuffling down the ice-covered sidewalks, I thought that this is an interesting distinction within our texts. Pausing a moment to look up amidst the sidewalk distress, changes everything. To the scriptures we go.

Numbers 21 is another installment of an on-going tension between the wandering Hebrews, the God who brought them into the wilderness and persons tasked with leading the rabble. This is not the first row the people have had with God within the book of Numbers.

In chapter 11 (v.1,4) the people complained about their misfortunes, in general, and specifically their wilderness rations. In chapter 14 “the whole congregation threatened to stone” Moses and other leaders. God notes that TEN TIMES (14.22) the people have tested Divine leading, and we are only in chapter 14. In chapter 16 Korah, Dathan and Abriam lead a revolt; they insist that God and Moses “have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey” (v. 14). Later in the chapter the people complain further (v. 41). In chapter 20 the people are thirsting and whining bitterly and wishing for the good old days of slavery. This brings us to chapter 21 in which the people have food, just not the kind of food they crave. God introduces to them the idea of looking up—to an image of a bronze serpent on a pole.

My point in this brief biblical survey from *Numbers* is to highlight that the people of God have regular relapses. It happens again and again. We are not healed of our afflictions be they physical or mental. At our best we learn to manage them. In the text a path of restoration comes not from looking down, or back, or inward or from prospects unrealized; it comes from looking up. There is an invitation to look up a bronze snake in Numbers 21 and look up to Jesus in John 3. Why?

In the Ancient Near East snakes were an image of significance.² The Pharaoh’s had their cobra like emblems on their turbans which represented power. The Romans had their snakes which represented healing. Back in the day whole temples were devoted to the god Aesculapius (middle picture) and these shrines housed snakes—a person could pay a fee, sleep among the serpents and await

² *Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by John L. McKenzie (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1965), pp. 789—791.

healing. The caduceus, two snakes wrapped around a pole which we see on ambulances and lapels of medical staff, is a mash job blending the single snake on the staff of Aesculapius with the imagery of the messenger Mercury which has two snakes around a winged pole.³ The ancient imagery is of a divine messenger who is an ambassador bringing tidings which heal. The snake tales of today draw upon a dominant cultural image of snakes offering healing. In the biblical witness, however, it is God who brings restoration and not the snakes.

So we have the staff of Aaron becoming a snake which eats the snakes of Pharaoh's magi (Ex 7:8-13). So we have the messianic child putting its hand on the den of the asp (11:8) as part of cosmic reconciliation. In the supplementary chapters of Mark's Gospel we have people handling snakes for redemptive purposes (16:18). In Acts Paul gets bitten by a poisonous snake with no adverse affect (28:3-6) which leads to conversions. Today's texts are a linguistic and mythological nod that it is God who tends our physical and emotional wounds.

Where do we look for solace when times are down? To the credit card and what it can avail? To the computer screen for endless escapism? To the modern temples which promise release from suffering—the sports stadium, the concert hall, the spa, the next meal out? Where do our attention and appetites turn when things are less well? The encouragement from our biblical stories of the day would be to gaze at God and Jesus.

Nicodemus appears three times in John's gospel. In John 3 Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus in the night; in the dark. The night in John's gospel is a way of saying "he / she / they are in the dark". "How many of us spend parts of our nights in waking hours sorting through questions and concerns. We know the dark of confusion and even disobedience."⁴ Jesus says that he has come not to condemn but to save. This plays itself out in the character of Nicodemus.

Nicodemus next appears in chapter 7. At this point he is at a gathering of Pharisees. He is still lukewarm towards Jesus, but the tenor of the text is that he has ambivalence with the block of Pharisees. By chapter 19 he is described as anointing the body of Jesus at his burial plot. Nicodemus is a work in progression throughout John's Gospel. Jesus cares for Nicodemus. He keeps the conversation going with those who choose to gaze at him. Jesus continues to receive Nicodemus, and us. Kathleen Norris writes in her book *Amazing Grace*: "I came to understand that God hadn't lost me, even if I seemed for years to have misplaced God".⁵ This takes me to reflections of how the conversation continues and contributes to repair of our mental and emotional well being.

³ [Asclepius | Definition, Myth, & Facts | Britannica](#)

⁴ *The Renouare Spiritual Formation Bible* (NRSV edited by Richard Foster), (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005): New Testament pp, 160-162.

⁵ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 104.

Sometimes a measure of restoration comes from the support of people around us. I was reminded of this as I read Duff Warkentin's short narrative within the MCC booklet, *Inside I am Dancing*. "We were now part of a small group which met quite regularly for socializing, sharing, supporting, studying issues or books, and discussing whatever was important...In this small group was a level of trust and commitment to each other that allowed its members to share as deeply and as personally as they felt comfortable doing. There was an acceptance of each other and a lack of judgement that was quite exceptional. This small group was an important part of my struggle with depression...For me, the most important thing was being together, with no pre-set agenda, just an openness to whatever would come up. My friends were (or seemed) completely comfortable with me sharing whatever I felt I needed to or could, or with just being with them, sometimes quite silent and withdrawn, but just being together. They were sensitive to me, but didn't treat me like an invalid or someone who was sick, or in need of charity... they loved me, and even when I was unable to express it, I loved (and love) them."⁶

A quote from black liturgist Cole Riley builds on this. "Sometimes you can't talk someone into believing their dignity. You do what you can to make a person feel unashamed of themselves, and you hope in time they'll believe in their beauty all on their own....When you believe in your dignity, or at least someone else does, it becomes more difficult to remain content with the bondage with which you have become so acquainted. You begin to wonder what you were meant for."⁷ Systemically, we all benefit from support groups (of which the church is one) that can help us normalize our humanity when question our self worth.

People make a difference, surely, and so do the arts. Diana Decaire offered us a brief reflection in our Lenten guide. And I also know that expressing herself through the visual arts has been a source of comfort and consolation in her journey with mental health. Her art is amazing if you haven't had the chance to see it. *Healing Through Words* is a recent publication by Rupri Kaur which offers guiding questions and space for journal entries within the book.⁸ It has sold over 10 million copies and been translated into 40 languages; clearly resource guiding many in the direction of healing. Journaling, poetry, painting, drawing and other forms of the arts shift our gaze from our limitations and losses. Our vision is elevated and contribute to our journey towards mental and spiritual repair.

⁶ Duff Warkentin, "The Lonesome Valley" in *Inside I'm Dancing: Personal Stories of God's Healing and Design*, edited by Edna Froese (Saskatoon, SK: Mennonite Central Committee), p. 111.

⁷ Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us* (New York: Convergent Books, 2022), p. 15.

⁸ Rupri Kaur, *Healing Through Words* (Toronto: Simon & Schuster, 2022).

Communities and countries benefit from a vibrant support of the arts because the arts contribute to the mental health people and places.

People and the arts make a difference, as does exercise and nature. In his book *Born to Walk* Dan Rubinstein cites numerous studies out of the UK in which the pedestrian act of walking, and particularly walking in nature contributes to higher levels of mental health. One study concluded that regular exercise in a park or forest may halve your risk of suffering from poor mental health.⁹ Communities and countries benefit from green spaces which can be accessed in all seasons because the nature and exercise contribute to the mental health people and places.

People, the arts, exercise, and nature make a difference to our mental health as does theology. We need good theology. Little, but important, theological observations make a huge difference in our world view, self esteem, and our mental health. Consider, for example, that Jesus came among us because God loves the world. This is a good creation God has shaped; and since we are part of this cosmos which God loves we, too, are loved. Consider, for example, that Jesus has not come to condemn us; God in Christ walks with us and finds lost sheep. Not all theology points people in these directions and it causes harm. Good theology contributes to our mental well being.

I conclude with another experience from the last weeks related to our texts of the day. It was a Tiefengrund Tuesday for me which meant I was in the hinterland at a country church. The day started nicely enough, but March weather generated white out conditions by afternoon. At 3:00 pm I stepped outside for some fresh air and it took my breath away. I went in, packed my bags, climbed in the truck and attempted to set out. The grid road was gone. Between the fresh snow and the ditches filled with old snow and the blowing snow, there was no discernible road. I tried sunglasses to no avail. Then I focused on the horizon. Trees often mark a section line. So I kept my eyes up rather than down and I made it through. I learned later that persons very acquainted with rural life hit the ditch that day, and it has been me on other days. We all hit the ditch now and again be it on snow covered roads or in our mental health. Even when our eyes are raised to the horizon or the heavens, it happens. We all fall down walking sometimes or coast into the ditch. There is no shame in this, it happens. And we give thanks for a God who so loves the world that there are people and habits and spiritual landmarks and a Saviour which help pull us up, and out, and through. Amen.

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⁹ Dan Rubinstein, *Born to Walk* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2018), p. 54.