

John 3:1-17 Numbers 21:4-9 - 2 Kings 18 v1-8

Today's starter question

It was created in 1730 at the behest of Queen Caroline It is a 40 acre recreational lake in a London park

Name it and the clue -there is a link with all three readings to day

The Serpentine in Hyde Park. Serpentine means having a winding course, snake like.

Sometimes a sermon can be serpentine

Sometimes a sermon does not make a link between all the bible readings, Today this sermon will.

The Hebrews are in the Sinai desert, half-heartedly following Moses on the winding trek toward a land that God has promised them. They have begun to doubt their leaders and even wonder if there is such a land at all. Moses' rag-tag band are complaining, bellyaching, *moaning* over the hard life of the desert, the strange, God-given diet of manna and quail, and the uncertainty of their serpentine route. For here, in Numbers 9, somewhere out in this seemingly God-forsaken desert, there is a plague of poisonous snakes. It was a full-blown case of *ophidiophobia*, the fear of snakes. these snakes were many, and they were poisonous. People began to die. And so they went to Moses, suspecting that the snakes were some kind of divine judgement . They asked that Moses intervene for them. Moses then does plead with God. In response, God tells Moses to fashion a serpent of bronze, put it on a pole, telling him that if any of the people are bitten by a poisonous snake, they should gaze at the bronze serpent and be healed. Interesting, isn't it? Look at a snake and be healed of snakebite. By the way, in olden time it was believed that if you were bitten by a rabid dog, you should take a little of the dog's hair and rub it into the wound. Like cures like, they said. Those who had been bitten gazed at the bronze serpent that Moses had made, and they were healed. It was a miracle.

End of story? Five hundred years have gone, the people have been settled in for some time in the Promised Land, where they had decided they needed to have kings like other nations. Many of those kings were disappointing and corrupt, but one king came along who was different. His name was Hezekiah, and he cleaned things up in the land. In fact, we are given a list of the things Hezekiah did: "He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole." What he did was destroy the pagan worship places, which had cropped up around the land. And then this: "He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan." Five hundred years after Moses had made the bronze serpent as a means of healing, they still had it, and *it had become an idol*. That is, what had been a means to an end had become an end in itself! Instead of pointing toward God, it now pointed toward itself; and the people worshiped the serpent instead of the God to whom it was to point. They had even named it! *Nehushtan* We're not sure what *Nehushtan* means, but it may be a play on the Hebrew word for "serpent." Or it may simply mean "piece of brass."

In any case, I wonder what the people's reaction was when King Hezekiah smashed that five-hundred-year-old bronze serpent. After all, it was made by Moses himself, a precious antique, a part of the nation's history. Some old things are precious, and some are just old.

Sometimes we Christians begin to worship what is old but no longer precious. We have our traditions, you and I. We chafe against change Funny that we should be this way. It's like that T-shirt I once saw. On the front it said, "Change is Good." On the back was written, "You First."

These two Old Testament passages about the bronze serpent illustrate a necessary point. What had been helpful and healing in one era had become an idol in another. How many things in the life of our churches used to be helpful and healing but have outlived their usefulness? How many old traditions have we turned into idols? There is much discussion these days about the church's failure to attract and engage young adults. We can't help but wonder if those who try our churches find us gathered around various prized bronze serpents that we should have smashed long ago. I must confess that I'm very fond of many such serpents, but people like me must challenge ourselves to ask which among them are no longer helpful or healing. Good King Hezekiah smashed the bronze serpent, in spite of what I'm sure were numerous complaints from the Hebrew Historical Architectural Review Board. And in so doing, he proved to be an example of the spirit of reform.

So are we done with our serpentine plot? Have we seen the last of the bronze serpent?

Even in a time when many people don't know much about the Bible, there's a verse a lot of us know by heart. We don't even have to recite it; just the reference will do: "John 3:16." It suggests the heart of the Christian message, summarizing what God did in Jesus. "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." The short form: "God so loved the world." That pretty much says it all, doesn't it? It's the good news in a nutshell.

We find Jesus visited by Nicodemus. In the third chapter of John, it is reported that Nicodemus, a respected member of the Sanhedrin, the religious leaders of Jerusalem, came to Jesus under cover of night. The purpose of this clandestine meeting was to ask serious questions of Jesus, for I suspect that Nicodemus was a genuine seeker who had urgent and searching questions.

Nicodemus speaks in whispered tones: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent by God. No one could perform the miracles you are doing unless God were with him." With these words of Nicodemus, a door is opened and Jesus steps through.

Jesus answered, "I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again. There is an alternative reading "I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above,"

Nicodemus thinks Jesus has said, "You must be born again." *What, he asks, you mean I have to go back into my mother's womb and be born all over again?*

No, says Jesus, *you need to be born on two levels--water and spirit. Again this can be You must be born from above!*

I believe what Jesus really said was, "You must be born from above." You see, he was trying to lift the eyes of Nicodemus the religious leader to take in higher things, so that he might begin to see his life from a spiritual perspective. *You must be born from above!*

*Loving Spirit, loving Spirit,
you have chosen me to be--
you have drawn me to your wonder,
you have set your sign on me.*

*Like a father, you protect me,
teach me the discerning eye,
hoist me up upon your shoulder,
let me see the world from high.*

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he "must be born of water and spirit." Lift up your eyes, Nicodemus! "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

Lift up your eyes, Nicodemus! There's more to life than you know!

So here it comes. John 3:16, "God so loved the world."

Do you hear the previous verses when it was read earlier that comes just before it?

As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life "

Here it is!

The bronze serpent has come back in the New Testament, in the gospel!

That old bronze serpent made by Moses and smashed by King Hezekiah has come back at the end of this serpentine story. Jesus is not saying that a serpent on a pole can heal you; he is saying that just as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness to heal, so he, Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, must be lifted up on a cross to save. You must lift up your eyes, Nicodemus! You must be born from above. You must discover the incredible world of the Spirit.

Do you see where this serpentine, meandering story of the snake has taken us? From the desert wanderings of Moses' rag-tag band to the hill of Calvary; and there we hear the call to lift up our eyes and see the one who offers himself and gives us abundant life.

Now the snake of Moses has led us to the, that "gospel in a nutshell": "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,

And then this great, final word: *For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its saviour.*

Lift up your eyes.

Lift up your hearts.

Our serpentine story has come to this: "For God so loved the world."