

God's Story – Our Story
Through the Wilderness – The Ultimate Anti-venom
March 3, 2024

Overarching Theme: 2024 – A Year in God's Story

Instructions:

When using this material as teacher, feel free to pick and choose the point you want to emphasize in the lesson. The format of the curriculum is designed to have an abundance of information in which to refer as desired.

Core Point: 2024 can be a year of living into God's Story as we journey from Genesis to Revelation together.

Reflect on this Scripture: Numbers 21:4-9 (NRSV) *⁴From 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. ⁵The 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." ⁶Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The 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. ⁸And 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." ⁹So 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.*

Commentary: The complaint in Numbers 21:5 issues in God's first response: to send snakes into the camps that bit some of the Hebrews who then died. This is not the result that we readers would expect.⁹ In response, the children of Israel acknowledge that they have sinned against God and Moses, and they ask Moses to intercede on their behalf to God. As a result, God instructs Moses to construct a snake of bronze (or copper) and to put it on a pole, with the promise that everyone who looks at it will live. That is where the narrative ends.

From this point of view, the narrative follows the typical narrative arc: sinful behavior, followed by a negative divine response, then repentance, and finally, divine restoration (see, for example, the cycles in Judges). Those last two elements are particularly relevant to the use of this text in the New Testament lesson for this week, John 3:14-15, where the Son of Man must

be lifted up, "that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." The physical gift of healing in Numbers is transformed into the spiritual gift of salvation in John. Looking at the serpent is transformed into believing in the Son of Man, but the same dynamic is clearly at play.

-Adapted from Online Commentary, Rev. Henry T.C. Sun

Questions to Ponder for Accountability in the Group:

1. In spite of God's provision for the children of Israel through the wilderness, they are consistently impatient and complaining. How do you think this tendency compares with us today? Are human characterized more by grumbling or gratitude? Explain your answer.
2. According to 21:6, the Lord sent a consequence – poisonous snakes. Why do you think this venomous people experienced this consequence? Is this simply a coincidence or is something more going on here?
3. Verse 7 marks one of the first times in Scripture that the children of Israel actually admit that they have sinned. What is the significance of this admission?
4. After Moses prays for the people, he is instructed by God to fashion a bronze serpent on a pole. Those afflicted by venom could look upon the uplifted serpent and live. In John 3:14, Jesus declares that in a similar way he will be lifted up (on the cross) so that all who believe in him will live. What do you make of the connection Jesus makes between the bronze snake and himself?

Activity for the Life of a Disciple:

1. Remember to find encouragement for the day by reading the daily devotional from FUMCC.
2. Ponder and pray on this scripture this week: Numbers 21: 8-9
⁸And 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."⁹So 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.