

Healthcare Sunday sermon outline: the bronze snake

Reading 1: Numbers 21:4-9

Part 1: the bronze snake – Healing

How do we regard medical care? Is it a God-given miracle? Is it human self-reliance? Is it grace responding to faith? Our reading is of a story from 1400 BC, about Moses leading the people of Israel in the wilderness after their miraculous Exodus through the Red Sea, when the people rejected the call of God to enter Edom out of fear.

(Numbers 21:4-9) They set out from Mount Hor along the Red Sea Road, a detour around the land of Edom: they are now going backwards, going the long way round. The people became irritable and cross as they travelled. They spoke out against God, and against Moses: *‘Why did you drag us out of Egypt to **die in a wilderness**, in this godforsaken country? We have no decent food, no water— we can’t stomach this light bread stuff any longer.*

‘So, God sent poisonous snakes among the people; they bit them and many in Israel died. The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke out against God and you. Pray to God; ask him to take these snakes from us.” So, Moses prayed for the people. God said to Moses, “Make a snake, a burning serpent, and put it on a flagpole: whoever is bitten and looks at it will live.” So, Moses made a snake of fiery copper and put it on top of a flagpole. Anyone bitten by a snake who then looked expectantly at the copper snake lived.’

Moses and Israel were faced with retreat. They suffered from biting snakes in the desert. God responded to faithful prayer and intercession with a treatment: a bronze serpent on a pole, as an antidote for the ‘fiery serpents’. Moses said, look up and believe; faith in another One brings you deliverance. This is a God-given miracle. The next reference to the bronze snake in scripture comes 700 years later, in the context of a new king of Judah.

Reading 2: 2 Kings 18:3-6

Part 2: the bronze snake – Idolatry

In God’s opinion, Hezekiah was a good king; he kept to the standards of his ancestor David. He got rid of the local fertility shrines, smashed the phallic stone monuments, and cut down the sex-and-religion Asherah poles. As a final stroke, he pulverized the ancient bronze serpent that Moses had made. Why? At that time the Israelites had taken up the practice of sacrificing to it—they had even dignified it with a name, *Nehushtan*. Hezekiah put his whole trust in the God of Israel. There was no king quite like him, either before or after. He held fast to God—never loosened his grip—and obeyed to the letter everything God had commanded Moses. And God, for his part, held fast to him through all his adventures.

This God-given miracle of healing had become an idol that was sacrificed to. In this they were just like the Canaanite people around them, having a fertility cult, with a god called ‘*Nehushtan*’, meaning ‘bronze serpent’. Examples of such figurines have been found by modern archaeologists. But the idol had to be destroyed. The work of healing must not be reduced to man’s efforts alone, it was exclusively God’s healing. But the symbol was not lost forever: 700 years later, another man of God speaks of it, Jesus Himself.

Reading 3: John 3:13-18

Part 3: the bronze snake – Salvation

Jesus says, 'In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert, in order that people could have something to see and then believe in, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up'—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain real life, eternal life.

And it is through this One who was looked upon, that we can say: 'This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed. By believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him, has long since been under the death sentence, without knowing it.

This is God's healing through the bronze snake restored. His intercessory prayer has once again brought a divine treatment. Look up at him, the Son of God lifted up on a cross, and believe expectantly, with faith, and you will live. God will provide for your life, real life, eternal life. he came to save and not to condemn. And he becomes the touchstone, the criterion that changes death to life.

In his earthly life, Jesus always had a special concern for the vulnerable and needy. Throughout subsequent centuries, the work of caring for the sick has been inspired and sustained through God's heart for the vulnerable. Today the NHS provides medical services through many skilled staff who have forgotten their spiritual origins, but they remain in need of strength and compassion in the face of unprecedented demands. Wherever and whenever we can, let us encourage and pray for those involved in healthcare. Let us bring them to the bronze snake, Christ our Healer, and pray he will reveal himself in power to them and their patients. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Rod MacRorie is a GP training programme director in Sandwell, West Midlands, and senior minister at Bearwood Baptist Church.