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## Lifted up

Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-17,

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For a few days the week before last, lots of people in Melbourne went around asking, “**What’s with the duck?**” “What was the meaning of that duck?” They were talking about the boy who held a duck in the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Games. Those of us who love the cartoons of Michael Leunig knew, because the duck in the opening ceremony was inspired by Leunig’s cartoon duck. The Leunig duck is a symbol. A symbol points beyond itself to something beyond. And, if it works well, it participates in the power of what it points to.

**Leunig’s duck** is a symbol of the innocence and wisdom of the animal. Some of us are fortunate enough to have a very wise dog in our lives. A dog can be wise just by looking at you. For Leunig it is a duck. The duck is the dwelling place of God. It is our innocent, beautiful and open inner-self. Some commentators call it Leunig’s direction-finding duck. Just by being there it reminds us of where we should be going. It symbolises the inner journey of surprise and joy.

Well, today, in response to the Bible reading I want to ask, “**What’s with the snake?**” I can understand a dog reminding us of wisdom, or even a duck, by being there, reminding us of our innocence and joy. But a deadly snake as a symbol of healing? Let’s look a little closer.

Our Old Testament reading today was from Numbers 21:4-9. Most of us don’t know much about Numbers, the fourth book in the Bible. It tells us about the time when Israel was on the move. They had escaped from Egypt and were on their way to the Promised Land. But most of the time they were in the desert, coping with the wilderness.

Numbers records names and numbers and how Israel organised itself while on the move. It also records lots of battles and arguments and disobedience towards God. That’s why Eugene Peterson, the author of *The Message*, a lively paraphrase of the Bible, says that Numbers seems to consist mainly of **counting and quarrelling**. Well, today’s story is about one of the quarrels they had with God, and because it is referred to in John 3, it is probably the most famous passage in Numbers.

The story is a strange one, but very powerful. **It's a story in three parts.** First there is ungratefulness and speaking against God. Then there is God's response of judgement. And then there is mercy and love and the free gift of life for all who turn again to God. Each part of the story is amazing! It's as if the Israelites, in their remembering of what happened, heightened each element of the story to make a point really strongly.

The **first part** shows the Israelites to be ungrateful and speaking against God. They really had no excuses to be like that. They had been slaves in Egypt, but God had heard their cry and had brought them out, with a promise of taking them to a good land. When they had complained about the lack of food in the desert God had sent them manna, a miraculous food that came down with the dew and tasted as delicious as wafers of honey (Ex 16:31). When they complained that they were sick of manna all the time and longed for some meat, God sent so many quails that the birds were lying metres deep on the ground (Num 11). When they complained about the lack of water, God had told Moses to strike a rock, and a miracle occurred—water gushed from the rock (Num 20).

But here they were, speaking against God again. Again, they looked longingly back to Egypt. Had they forgotten how harsh life had been? Now they were feeling that life in the wilderness was too hard. They were discovering that life consists of obstacles, and they were learning very slowly that growing up means accepting that life is often difficult, but that God loves us deeply and is alongside us.

The **second part** of the story seems pretty tough, but there are plenty of stories in the Old Testament with a similar outlook: God punished them with a plague of deadly snakes. To be really honest, I don't think God works this way. If God killed everyone who complained against God, most of us would be dead by now! But this is how the Israelites interpreted this terrible event.

For them it was a huge wake-up call. It was as if God was saying, "You think the desert is bad; well, try this! I'll give you something to really complain about!" In the context of the long list of stories of how Israel continually grumbled and complained and lacked trust in God, we could say that God's responses were dramatic ways to get their attention and remind them that it really mattered that they trusted God and that any other way would lead to trouble and disaster.

In this case, the snakes worked. I think they'd work on me too! Israel was sorry and confessed their sin. They took responsibility for their bad behaviour. Moses prayed on their behalf for mercy.

The **third part** of the story is just as amazing and dramatic. Moses is told by God to put a bronze or copper snake on a pole. Anyone who was bitten by a snake and looked at it would live. And so it happened.

Most of us have a negative view of snakes. We're scared of them. They're dangerous and hard to spot. Most of the references to snakes in the Bible are negative too—they're usually assumed to be poisonous and deadly. It was a snake which tempted Eve in the Adam and Eve story in Genesis.

So it's surprising that God tells Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole. What is even more surprising is that God should tell Jews to make an image and turn towards it. It almost seems like an idol, and the Jews were forbidden to make idols. Some Near Eastern cultures worshipped snakes as gods.

But the story is very clear. It was not the bronze snake that cured the snake bites. The snake was **only a symbol of the power of God** behind it. God protected those who turned away from their complaining against God and said sorry. And each person who had been bitten had to turn to the snake symbol themselves; the cure wasn't automatic.

There's a very interesting mention of this bronze snake later in the Old Testament, in 2 Kings 18:4. Hezekiah became king of Israel and restored a proper attitude to worshipping God. One of the first things he did was to **smash the bronze snake** on the pole. Why? Because, like those around them, the Israelites were calling it the sacred pole, calling the snake Nehushtan, the name of a god, and making offerings to it. The symbol had become their god.

But in the desert, the snake lifted up on the pole was **the sign of life**. The animal which so often symbolised death was the symbol of healing. The wilderness, the place of hardship and complaining, was now the place of healing and creativity.

And the factor that turned it all around? The people saw how wrong they'd been and **turned to God**.

This is very relevant to us today. As I look around today I know that many, perhaps, most of you have known hard times, wilderness times, desert experiences. Many of us right now are experiencing difficulties, loss of loved ones, loss of your home country, health troubles, loneliness, failure, discouragement, poverty, and so on. Life can be a

rocky journey, can't it? We know how the Israelites felt, complaining and speaking against God.

Many of us have been angry against God. We feel we deserve better. We think we've had a rough time. But, the truth is, as the writer Scott Peck says in the opening line of his book *The Road Less Travelled*, "**Life is difficult**". Another writer, Alfred D'Sousa says,

For a long time it has seemed to me that life was about to begin, real life, but there was always some obstacle in the way, something to be gotten through first. Unfinished business, time still to served, a debt to be paid, then life will begin. At last it dawned on me that these obstacles were my life.

Amid the difficulties of life is the life-giving presence of God. It is ironic that the very thing that threatened the lives of the Israelites, the poisonous snakes, led them to realise that God loved them deeply. The snake on the pole symbolised the mercy of God. The snake pointed to God's grace to the Israelites, who never seemed to be satisfied.

The three parts of this story remind me of three words used by theologian **Walter Brueggemann**: When we encounter God we begin with a particular '*orientation*': we're heading in a certain direction. For the Israelites in the desert it was ungratefulness. Then God breaks in and we experience '*disorientation*', confusion, crisis, questioning, even chaos. For the Israelites it was the threat of the poisonous snakes, leading to repentance for their grumbling. Then we experience God's love and it leads to a '*reorientation*', which opens us to new life into the future. To be Christian is to be experiencing ongoing reorientation as we are shaped by Jesus Christ.

I wonder if you've experienced the love of God in a way similar to the Israelites: orientation (travelling along in one direction), then disorientation (God disturbing our lives, maybe even experiencing hardship or sickness) and then reorientation (a turning around, a new direction, an opening out into a sense of God's presence).

This orientation, disorientation and reorientation is part of the message of **the John 3 passage** we heard in Chin earlier. Verses 14 to 17, which we heard, are part of the story of Nicodemus. He was going along in a certain direction, as an educated Pharisee, respectable and very religious. Then, disorientation! He meets Jesus, who says that we need to be born a second time! "What's this about getting back into your mother's womb?" he asks, totally confused. Jesus confuses him further, saying that we have to be born of the Spirit, which is mystery, blowing

where it wants to. Life is not neat and predictable. Jump out into the sea of faith, Jesus is really saying.

Then verse 16, John 3:16, the most famous verse in the Bible. “For God so loved the world ...”. In the context of John’s Gospel, **the world, the cosmos, is a dark place**, the place where sin rules. The world is the Israelites grumbling. Today it is war in Iraq. It is millions dying in Sudan while in Melbourne this month we spend a billion dollars on games and dazzling spectacles. It is a Burmese military government oppressing its people. “God so loves the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes may not perish but have eternal life.” The offer of reorientation, new life and the ultimate conquering of death!

This is the essence of God’s nature: **costly, gracious love** for the whole world. The verse before John 3:16 refers to the story in Numbers 21. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. What an irony, this term “lifted up”. It could mean ‘glorified’, but in this case it meant an inglorious death on a Roman cross outside the city.

The snake, the symbol of death, became the symbol of healing and life. The cross on which Jesus was lifted up, the symbol of death, became the symbol of eternal life.

Just as the Israelites had to turn from their grumbling and ungratefulness, the whole world is invited to turn away from its wrong ways, its violence, its oppression, its despair.

Just as the Israelites were invited to look upon the bronze snake, so are we invited to **turn to the cross and be healed**. Note, however, that it was not the snake which magically healed, but rather the love of God which the snake symbolised. So also with the cross: wearing a cross around our neck is not a magical cure for life—the cross is only a symbol of the deep, deep love of God in Jesus Christ.

So, what is it about Leunig’s duck? It is simply a symbol of our inner innocence and joy. What is it about the snake in the wilderness? It is a symbol of how, in the midst of hardship and obstacles, God’s loving and healing presence can be felt. And what is it about the cross? It is a symbol that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.

Here, in the middle of Lent, we pause to reflect on the road to the cross. We pause to confess our sin and to open our hearts to the healing and joy that God offers. Have you recently opened yourself to God to ask to

be “reoriented”? To ask to actually experience a sense of God’s free, healing love? For the Israelites it meant being bitten but not dying. For us it might mean facing loss but not tossing it in. Or suffering illness but being able to receive and give love nevertheless. Or living with conflict but not letting it eat away in us.

May God’s healing power be at work within you during this Lenten season, when we face the road to the cross and long with the deepest longing for the experience of resurrection in our lives.

*Ross Langmead*