

Fourth Sunday in Lent
Cycle B RCL
Revised

Numbers 21:4-9

This is an etiological narrative from JE that explains the origin of the bronze serpent in the Jerusalem temple that King Hezekiah destroyed as part of his reform movement (2 Kings 18:4). Images of serpents had long been a symbol of healing in the Mediterranean world, and it is reasonable to believe that the bronze serpent in Jerusalem was also the image of a healing god or a totem used in healing. Its venue certainly must have extended beyond curing snakebites to other kinds of illness or physical injury. For the author of 2 Kings (Dtr), however, the object was a prohibited image “before” God and so had to be destroyed as part of the temple purification.

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

This is a long liturgy of thanksgiving and should be classed with the *community thanksgivings*. Four different situations of distress are recounted: 4-5, 10-12, 17-18, 23-27, covering the vicissitudes of Israel's history. Some commentators have found verse 3 to refer to the Exile and so would date this psalm to the 5th century and the restored temple of Nehemiah.

Ephesians 2:1-10

The Epistle to the Ephesians is an expansion of the Epistle to the Colossians written in Paul's name sometime in the last part of the first century CE. Although in many ways a good digest of Paul's thought, the present passage also illustrates some differences. For instance, in 2:5, 8, salvation is already an accomplished fact, whereas for Paul, salvation is something that will only happen in the future. Unlike Paul, who in the Corinthian letters opposed those who believed that the resurrection had already occurred, our author in 2:6 asserts that God “has raised us up.” Vintage Paul, however, is the rejection of salvation through works and any boasting that might derive from such self-salvation (2:8-9).

John 3:14-21

The bronze serpent made and put on a pole to cure the wandering Israelites of their snakebites (Numbers 21:4-9, above) contains the implicit choice between looking at the bronze serpent and being healed or not looking at it and dying. Believing in Jesus, therefore, is akin to the act of looking at the bronze serpent. The image exists for healing, but refusal to look upon it means death. This understanding provides the perfect parallel to John's view of faith as a saving vision (John 1:18). God sent the Son to redeem the world, not to condemn it. Nevertheless, we condemn ourselves if we refuse to look.