

- *I have told this story before:* When I was in high school, I spent a weekend with some friends in a nearby college town in western Massachusetts. Our host was the daughter of a professor there. When she showed us the downstairs den where we would be staying, she had *a surprise* for us. In the next room was a large cage. And in it, was a six foot boa constrictor! Hearing this, I was *both fascinated and fearful*. She then amazed us by reaching into the cage. Tipping over a box under which the snake was sleeping, she picked it up! *Though* she assured us the boa was *safe*, *none of us* wanted to touch it.
- After awhile she put it back in the cage, and we returned to the den. But I *couldn't stop thinking about* that snake, and how my friend had so easily and fearlessly handled it. *Somehow*, I convinced myself that—if *she could* pick up that snake—*I could, too*. Now, *I must admit*, she was an attractive young woman, and this *may have eased* my change of mind! (*Between her and the snake, perhaps I should have remembered Genesis*) And so, encouraged by her, I went to the other room and came back carrying that *fearfully big* boa. Not long after this, helped by my biology teacher, I bought a boa constrictor of my own, which I kept for several years. My boa became important to me because it was *a symbol*. *Something I was previously afraid of*, became a symbol for me ~ *a symbol of reconciliation with fear*. What previously *represented a threat* and potential *harm*, now *symbolized a victory* and a *bigger world*. *Believing circumstances could be different*, allowed me to see *something in a radically new way*.
- With your worship bulletin this morning, I have included two photos, at least one of which may be familiar. The smaller photo is of a bronze serpent in a church, in Milan, Italy. The *second* one is of *Giovanni Fantoni's striking sculpture on the top of Mt. Nebo, in Jordan*. *Both sculptures commemorate the same Bronze Serpent in our first reading, during Israel's wilderness wanderings in the Sinai Peninsula*. In the top photo, you can see a serpent

twined around the pole with its head at the top, encircled by a loop of its body. Since the Numbers serpent story happened in Egypt, we need to ask why this sculpture is placed on Mt. Nebo. Well, from that vantage point, *you can see Jerusalem on a clear day*. The same view includes Jericho and other sites in Israel. This helps us understand *why so many historic African American churches are named after Mt. Nebo*. Mt. Nebo was the place from which Moses *saw the Promised Land*, though he never got there. *Seeing the Promised Land then became a metaphor for anticipating deliverance and arriving at salvation*. This theme figured powerfully in Martin Luther King's last sermon, on the night before he was assassinated.

- On that evening in Memphis, King said this: "Like anybody, I would like to live...a long life... *But I'm not concerned about that now*. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And *I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But, I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land*. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*"¹ King was likening *his* experience of seeing *glory* to that of Moses, who went up to Mt Nebo where the Lord showed him the new land.² *After Moses saw the Promised Land, he died*. And the day after King talked about having seen the Promised Land, *he died, as well*. But the *sight* had given him *hope*, even as he faced death.
- *So, what shall we make of this connection between seeing the serpent in the wilderness, and seeing the Promised Land from Mt. Nebo?* The answer is suggested by Fantoni's symbolic sculpture on its summit. We can imagine Israel's experience in the wilderness, where serpents represented *death*, because many people were bitten and died. Here is the part of their story we should *not* miss: Thy came to Moses, saying, "*We have sinned...; pray to the LORD, to take away the serpents from us.*" So Moses prayed for the

people.³ Then, '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.'"

Believing circumstances could be *different*, allowed the people to *see* them in a *new* way. *Believing* led to *new seeing*.

- Considering the story's background, we may assume the Israelites shared a belief with some other ancient cultures. *Perhaps* the bronze serpent made by Moses was *simply* a *talisman*, an *object with mystically protective power*. But a *more basic explanation* is possible. After the people had *penitently cried out*, Moses made the bronze serpent. Therefore, *the bronze serpent became a symbol of their repentance, and of their deliverance to new life*. Repentant hearts *recognized the power within the symbol*, when something they previously feared became an *effective* reminder of *reconciliation*.
- Here, we can learn from *Fantoni's sculpture*, atop Mt. Nebo. *The sculptor had more in mind than the wilderness story about serpents*. For his work *clearly refers to our Gospel today*. Notice how the body of the snake, looped around its own head, *also suggests* the head of *the One* who has been crucified. And see *how* the lyrically-shaped crosspieces evoke outstretched arms. They *remind* us of how John tells us that, "*just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...*" *Figuratively*, Jesus and his impending death are likened to Moses' bronze serpent. Seeing him lifted up, repentant hearts recognize a *new* power. For something ugly, and linked with a terrible death, has become a *symbol of new life and redemption*.
- As Paul tells us, "Christ was innocent of sin, and yet *for our sake God made him one with the sinfulness of men, so that in him we might be made one with the goodness of God himself*."⁴ Something having the power to kill us was neutralized when it was embraced by divine love.

- ***This is how we now think about the Cross.*** *Over time*, an object representing a fearful end, has come to symbolize a new and different beginning: ***a symbol of our fears has been transformed into a symbol representing reconciliation with our fear.*** The cross was an instrument of *violent execution*, effectively used to suppress the will and spirit of people under domination. But, *now and for us*, it's not so much about the *past*, as it is about the *future*. We wonder at how, over time, ***the cross became a symbol of life, and of love.*** For seeing the one lifted up, opens to us the promised land of new fellowship with God. The Lord has conquered the sources of our fears, and makes them signs of his victory. ***Truly, believing that things could be different allows us to see the disfigured world in a new way.*** *And*, it also allows us to see ourselves in a transformed way.



The Brazen Serpent, Giovanni Fantoni, on Mt. Nebo, in Jordan



Bronze Serpent, 10th Century Byzantine Style; Milan, Italy

(Source: Slices of Light • Flickr • bit.ly/211mX0S / creative commons)

John 3:14-21

Jesus said, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“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.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Notes:

¹ Martin Luther King, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” as quoted in Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I've_Been_to_the_Mountaintop; accessed 13March15.

² See Deuteronomy 34:1-4.

³ Numbers 21:7; see Numbers 21:4-9, for the story.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:21, in the New English Bible translation; <http://www.katapi.org.uk/katapiNSBunix/NEB/NEBTextByBC.php?B=308&C=5>