

Illustrations of Immanuel: A Serpent for Sinners

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Advent Service

Numbers 21:5-9 ⁵ And the 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 our soul loathes this worthless bread." ⁶ So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. ⁷ Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

Who was bitten by the fiery serpents? Was it the righteous or the innocent? No, it was the unrighteous and the guilty. For whom was the bronze serpent put on a pole? Did Moses make it for himself? No, the bronze serpent was lifted up for the sake of the guilty.

In the same way, Jesus was lifted up—not for the innocent or the righteous, but so that God might have mercy on sinners. The serpent was for the sinner.

Imagine walking into a room and seeing a man holding down a child and using a drill to make a hole in the child. What would you think of those men? Monsters? What if the man is a doctor, and the drilling is necessary to save the child's life. Although it might seem terrible at first, when you know the whole story, it isn't terrible at all.

Similarly, many people attempt to make God out to be a monster, either because they do not know the whole story or because they purposely leave it out. However, when the whole story is revealed, it is clear that God is not a monster.

Our text this evening is a good example. If we only consider verses 8 and 9, we see that all those who looked at the bronze serpent lived. So, what about those who didn't look? They died. You could phrase it this way: God killed everyone who wouldn't look at the serpent.

That would make God seem like a monster—killing people just because they wouldn't look at a statue Moses made. That sounds more like a toddler demanding attention than a loving, all-knowing, merciful God.

But that isn't what really happened. People didn't die because they didn't look at the bronze serpent; they died because they were bitten by poisonous snakes. The reason they were bitten wasn't because God was in a sulky mood and decided to kill a bunch of them. Rather, the people insisted they didn't want God's food, water, or protection anymore, so God removed his protection as they asked, and the snakes came in. In other words, they died because of the choices they made. Those who were saved were saved despite their sins, by God's mercy, which was revealed in the form of the bronze serpent.

That serpent is another illustration of Immanuel.

John 3:14-15 “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

In our reading on Sunday, the crushing of the serpent's head is a picture of how Jesus would crush the head of our enemy—Satan and sin—and set us free.

In our reading tonight, a serpent is used as a picture of Jesus himself. Just as the serpent was hung on a tree, so also Jesus would hang on a tree. Just as those who looked at the serpent were saved from the consequences of their own sin, so also those who look to Jesus will be saved from the consequences of their own sin.

It is our sin that condemns us; it is Jesus who saves.

I've never heard anyone claim that God was unjust to allow the Israelites to die—though such claims probably exist. But I have often heard the claim that it is unjust for God to allow people to go to hell just because they don't believe.

For example, I once had a boss who said that any God who would kill his own son is not a god she would want to worship.

Another example comes from a video I saw this week:

“Any god that would have a system like that, where you burn in eternity because you didn't like them, is a monster, is an egotistical maniac. And why on earth would I worship somebody like that?”

That would be true, of course, if that were really what was going on. But if God were really like that, we would all be dead, because any god like that would have destroyed us long ago.

Such people are ignorant of, or purposely missing, an important part of the story.

The Israelites were dying because of the choices they made. It is not unbelief that condemns, but sin. The apostle Paul reminds us:

Romans 6:23 “For the wages of sin is death.”

Just like the Israelites, the choices we make, the words we say, the actions we take, and the thoughts we think are the reason we are dying. But God’s mercy is revealed in the Son of God, who was born, died, and raised from the dead, so that whoever looks to him might have eternal life.

This morning, I was talking to the kids about pink dolphins. Apparently, scientists aren’t sure why river dolphins are pink. They are born grey and become pink as they grow older. One credible theory is that the pink is scar tissue. River dolphins love to fight, and when their skin gets cut, it grows back pink. The more pink you have, the more fights you’ve survived. That means pink is a very manly color, showing off what a tough guy you are.

Imagine if every sin you ever committed were marked on your skin—every wrong thought or action tattooed on your body for all to see. Even though our sins are not plain for other humans to see, they are clearly visible to God. It is because of these sins that we deserve hell:

Ezekiel 18:4 “The soul who sins shall die.”

It is not because we failed to look to Christ, but because of our sin. Jesus, however, showed his love to us by choosing to be lifted up on the cross so that all who look to him might not die but live.

Jesus did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Those who can look God in the eye and say, “Go ahead, search my heart, my thoughts, and my life; you will find nothing sinful,” have no need of Jesus. For the rest of us who are ashamed of our sins, Jesus was lifted up that we might be saved from the consequences of our own choices.

We are the Israelites, whining and complaining in the wilderness. We are the Israelites dying—not because God chose to kill us, but because we ourselves chose sin, which leads to death. Jesus is the bronze serpent, lifting himself up on the cross to give life to those who are dying. Amen