

“Believing, but Not Trusting, God.”

In the three-year cycle of Sunday readings – which, I might mention, includes over 630 selections from the Bible – readings from the Old Testament book of Numbers appear only four times. Of course, if you’ve ever read the book of Numbers, you’d know why.

Now, the passage we heard this morning, describes an incident that took place among the ancient Israelites after they had been freed from slavery in Egypt, but before they had reached the Promised Land. In other words, they were still on their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness. The euphoria they felt during their rescue from slavery in Egypt, and later when they received the Ten Commandments, has long ago worn off. Their journey is no longer an adventure. Rather, it has turned into a hardship, with no end in sight. As a result, their faith in God, that he would do for them as he had promised, has suffered.

And so they start to complain, like children on a long car ride: “Are we there yet?” and “I’m hungry!” and “I’m thirsty!” and so on. Eventually, the focus of their complaints shift from their miserable conditions to their leaders, to Moses and God. Suddenly, the Israelites find themselves surrounded by poisonous snakes, which they interpret to be a sign of God’s anger with them. And so, in order to save their lives, they change their tune.

It’s at this point that God instructs Moses to make a “serpent of bronze,” set upon a pole. And whenever someone was bitten by a poisonous snake, all they had to do was look at the bronze serpent and they would be saved. The Israelites may not have had much faith in God, but they learned to have a lot of faith in that bronze serpent. That, in a nutshell, is our reading from Numbers. But it’s a story with a big problem.

Last week, one of our readings was from Exodus 20, where God issued his Ten Commandments. If you recall, the second of the Ten Commandment prohibits idols and graven images. So, what does God do in today’s reading from Numbers? He tells Moses to make a graven image ... a bronze serpent. Really? What’s going on?

Let me be clear: I have no problem if God wants to rescind one of his commandments. All I'd like, is to have a little forewarning. I'd like to be able to get out my calendar and make some plans: "Lord, tell me again, when will it be alright for me to steal? Cool!"

Another problem is the fact that the bronze serpent became really popular. Not only did it save everyone who was snake-bit, but within five hundred years, that bronze snake became one of the treasures of the Temple in Jerusalem. It had acquired a name, "Nehushtan," and it garnered a following of people who made regular offerings and sacrifices to it.

This story is so problematical, that it probably wouldn't have made it into our schedule of Sunday readings, except for the fact that Jesus makes reference to it in today's Gospel, when he says:

"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up."

Now, that big problem notwithstanding, we can still give this strange story from Numbers credit for one thing: It provides us with a perfect example of how people can *believe* in God, but not really *trust* him. The Israelites had no doubt as to the existence of God. They believed in God. (In fact, they probably still believed in a lot of gods.) But at that point in their journey, they simply didn't trust God to get them to the Promised Land safely.

Now, this is where things get interesting: our Gospel reading describes pretty much the same phenomenon: people believing in God, but not trusting God to do what he says he's going to do. The first half of our Gospel reading describes what God was going to do for the world:

"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" (John 3:16-17).

Wonderful words! And famous words. Who hasn't seen "John 3:16" written on posterboard, and held up for the television cameras in the end zone of a football game? And these words are pretty straight-forward: God loved the world, and God saved the world. In fact, the word "world" is a translation of the Greek word *kosmos*. So, there's really not much ambiguity here: God loved the

kosmos, and God saved the *kosmos*. In other words, God is going to redeem, restore, and renew everything he has created.

And what's more, our reading from Ephesians adds a cherry to the top of that salvific sundae, when Paul writes:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God”
(Ephesians 2:8-9).

So, to sum up: Jesus tells us that God has saved the world, the *kosmos*. And St. Paul tells us that our salvation is a free gift. No strings attached. Period. End of story.

But this is where things get dicey, because for some people, what Jesus and Paul have said, seems ... well, too good to be true. And that's a problem. It's not that these people don't believe in God. They do! It's just that they can't bring themselves to trust what God said he was going to do. Why? Because for them, and for many people, that's not how things get done in the real world. At some point, we've all heard that “there's no such thing as a free lunch,” or that “you can't get something for nothing.” Haven't we all heard that?

Now, I'll admit that the language in the second half of our gospel— which includes words like “condemned” and “judgment”— sounds pretty harsh, but that doesn't compromise the promises and assurances offered in the first half. And the reason for that is this: God's economy is different from our's.

God's economy isn't based upon transactions, where God saves us because we have faith, or because we are obedient, or because we've been good. Rather, God's economy is based upon relationships: Simply because God loves us (because God loves the *kosmos*), God saves us (God saves the *kosmos*). End of story. Really!

Now, in our reading from Numbers, God had to deal with a group of people who, though they believed in him, didn't trust him. What did he do? He set aside one of his commandments, and allowed them to have a graven image, an idol. It was his way of saying “I care about you so much that I'm willing to make whatever sacrifice I must to earn your trust; I'll even sacrifice one of my commandments.”

And in our gospel reading, God was still dealing with people who still didn't trust him— who didn't trust what Jesus was saying. So, what did he do then? He made another sacrifice: he sacrificed himself.

Even though nearly two thousand years have elapsed since John and Paul offered us their writings, things really haven't changed that much. The Church is still filled with people who believe in God, but who don't fully trust what God said he was doing for us. And, honestly, I'm not sure there's anything anyone can do or say to change that. And that's a shame.

Maybe the best thing we can do, when our trust is wavering, is to keep in mind the two proclamations we've heard this morning. Remember what Jesus said in our gospel reading:

“For God so loved the [*kosmos*] 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 [*kosmos*] to condemn the [*kosmos*], but in order that the [*kosmos*] might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17).

And then, remember what Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

And finally— although I almost hate to suggest this— take to heart the words on that old bumper sticker:

“God said it. I believe it. And that settles it.”

Amen.