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## The Power of Belief

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

### Numbers 21:4-9:

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 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 we detest this miserable food." Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And 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." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

### John 3:14-17

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Chosen One be lifted up, that whoever believes in the Chosen One may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that God gave his only child, so that everyone who believes in this child may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send his child into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.



What in the world do you believe in? Without belief – faith, we have no mission in life, no true purpose. Because in order to achieve something—anything—you have to believe in something. American humorist Arnold Glasgow stated: "Make your life a mission – not an intermission." Let us pray:

God of the journey, sometimes it feels like our life is a very badly written play – one problem after another, seemingly unconnected and without a plot line. Through the power of your Holy Spirit, infuse us with strength and hope, so that we don't walk out during the intermission—let us not give up and resign ourselves to lives of hopelessness. Like Jesus, may we be persistent in our mission of asking hard questions and of reflecting your love, grace, and peace to the world around us. AMEN.

When I was growing up, I had a really wonderful Sunday School teacher. His name was Cliff Rechkemmer, and he was a little older than my father was at the time. He didn't try to be young or cool, but he did let us play cards – the catch was that we had to play with his deck of cards, which only had Bible verses on them. The most important thing he taught us as we learned Bible verses was this: Never use John 3:16, without John 3:17—he looked right at me and said this, and of course, that's the way we had to memorize the verses, together. He was a wise man; I wish the rest of Christianity would catch up with him.

So exactly what do you believe in? I hope that you have someone to nag you about that question, to keep asking you like a 4 year old child: WHY? Why, why, why? When we ponder the questions seriously, we learn more about God's love and about ourselves and about the world around us. If we don't ask the hard questions, we run the risk of becoming gullible. Like the story of the woman in line at Wal-Mart buying a big bag of Purina Dog Chow. She writes:

"A woman behind me asked if I had a dog. What did she think I had -- an elephant? So since I'm retired, with little to do, and on impulse, I told her that no, I didn't have a dog, but I was starting the Purina Diet again. Although I probably shouldn't, because I'd ended up in the hospital last time... but that I'd lost 50 pounds before I woke up in ICU with tubes coming out of most of my orifices and IV's in both arms. I told her that it was essentially a perfect diet and you just load your pants pockets with Purina nuggets and simply eat one or two every time you feel hungry, and that the food is nutritionally complete so I was going to try it again. (I have to mention here that practically everyone in the line was, by now, enthralled with my story.) Horrified, she asked if I ended up in Intensive Care because the dog food poisoned me. I told her no; I stepped off a curb to sniff an Irish Setter's behind, and a car hit us both. I thought the guy behind her was going to have a heart attack, he was laughing so hard!" She also writes that Wal-Mart won't let her shop there anymore.

The power of belief—Remember the peanut butter song from a number of years ago? If you believe in peanut butter clap your hands! If you believe in peanut butter, you gotta' believe, in Peter Pan! Well, I don't know if it sold any peanut butter, but it certainly was catchy! I have to confess that sometimes I look at the songs Christians sing and I wonder if they're just singing about peanut butter. I wonder if they have ever really examined their beliefs at all, or if it's just easier to sing peanut butter the way you were taught. Like Lily Tomlin, I believe the best mind-altering drug is the truth; and I believe that the search for truth is something planted deep within us, something God wants us to pursue.

If ever you needed a text to point to, to realize that scriptures, while divinely inspired, are not from the mouth of God to the text, it is this strange story from Numbers 21. It comes right after God supposedly told the wandering Hebrews to destroy all of the cities of King Arad the Canaanite. Hmmmm—one of the things about the Hebrew religion that they are not very flexible about, never have been and aren't very much so today, even among reformed Judaism, is not to make graven images. So for God to tell Moses to make a poisonous serpent, and Moses to then make one out of brass and God supposedly told the people to look on it and live, well, let's just say I have my doubts that that's the way it happened. The second commandment states: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." In no other place in scripture does God command anyone to make an image of something; let alone to hold that image up for healing. You know what I think? I think Moses got scared, but decided he could use the power of belief to good use. And, according to the story, it worked. Belief is a powerful thing.

And so the verses that lead into the most beloved and memorized passage of the New Testament, John 3:16, this famous verse is preceded by a reference comparing Jesus to the serpent of bronze—that Jesus must be lifted up so that we can look upon him and believe. Perhaps one message is just that when we are perplexed and frustrated, as Moses was, that we remember this—our example of Jesus—and lift up that example so that others may believe. It is, after all, followed by those powerful verses about God's belief in us and what God is willing to do for us to provide us with eternal life.

So what do you believe in? Do you sometimes belittle the beliefs of others? I can tell you what I believe in: the power of God's unconditional love and the Spirit's desire that we use that unconditional love as a model in all of our relationships. I believe that how we treat people matters. Loretta sent me this wonderful story that bears repeating. The author writes:

"One day I hopped in a taxi and we took off for the airport. We were driving in the right lane when suddenly a car jumped out of a parking space right in front of us. My taxi driver slammed on his brakes, skidded, and missed the other car by just inches! The driver of the other car whipped his head around and started yelling at us. My taxi driver just smiled and waved at the guy, and I mean, he was really friendly! So I asked, 'Why did you just do that? This guy almost ruined your car and sent us to the hospital!' This is when my taxi driver taught me *The Law of the Garbage Truck*. He explained that many people are like garbage trucks. 'They run around full of garbage, full of frustration, full of anger, and full of disappointment. As their garbage piles up, they need a place to dump it and sometimes they'll dump it on you. Don't take it personally. Just smile, wave, wish them well, and move on. Don't take their garbage and spread it to other people at work, at home, or on the streets. Don't let garbage trucks take over your day. Love the people who treat you right. Pray for the ones who don't.'"

Connie Drevich sent me these thoughts in an email, which tell me Connie gets it. It was in response to a message forwarded to her where some coach is complaining about ABC's using gay characters. Connie wrote: "I'm so tired of people telling me how I should think. When Jesus taught us to love one another and forgive one another, it's so easy in theory, but yet it's so hard to do in practice. It's much harder to love or forgive a person, especially when they are so unlovable or their message is a message of hate. Yet, if we follow Jesus' example, we must do that even more so. What a tough lesson."

"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Jesus." "For God sent God's child into the world, not to condemn the world but so that the world through Jesus might have life." If you put all the verses together, it points to a God truly worth believing in, a God who believes in us. What do you believe in?