

The reading from Numbers 21 describes a small band of emancipated slaves on the way to freedom. The transition from slavery to freedom is not achieved in a single moment of liberation. The road to freedom is much longer and more arduous than they imagined. These liberated slaves wander in the wilderness for a generation shaking off the habits of slavery, learning the responsibilities of freedom.

Along the way they complain about almost everything, including the food which causes them to retch. They revile the divine gift sustaining them in the wilderness. The patience necessary for healing from the ravages of slavery evaporates in the desert. They charge Moses and God with bringing them into the wilderness to die.

When the present moment proves challenging, when the work required to create a better future feels daunting, they forget what the past was really like and indulge in nostalgic fantasies, remembering life in slavery as idyllic. Overwhelmed they murmur (bitch and moan) and become bitter. Bitterness poisons the whole community.

It seems God's patience ebbed and fiery serpents slithered out from under every rock, killing many. Moses intervenes and at God's direction erects a bronze serpent in the midst of the camp. The people are instructed to look up at the serpent and live.

Sympathetic magic? Perhaps. But I think something more is intended by the narrator. By raising the bronze serpent in the midst of the camp, Moses is saying, "If you want to be healed you must look at what is poisoning you, you must confront and own your behavior and its deadly consequences."

The first step in being healed of whatever is poisoning our souls is to objectify it, lift it up high and look at it until we can clearly see it for what it is: the gloom that shades our minds, the bitterness that hardens our hearts, the fear that makes us captive to the powers of death.

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Pastor scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouths
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rut, for the trees to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop

(American songwriter and poet, Abel Meeropol, born of Russian-Jewish immigrants, taught English at Dewitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, had James Baldwin as a student, published "Strange Fruit" as a poem in 1937 with the title "Bitter Fruit." Billie Holiday recorded the song in 1939. Her version was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1978, and included in the "Songs of the Century" list of the National Endowment of the Arts.)

Until we have the courage to look up at the strange fruit hanging from the poplar tree, to behold our original sin, to confront the deadly consequences of racism, we will never be healed as a country, we will never realize the promise of "out of many one," we will never be free.

To ban the teaching of our history, to censor the telling of the whole story, to indulge in the nostalgic fantasy of white supremacy, to believe in the apocalyptic illusion of Christian nationalism, is to breed fiery serpents which will continue to poison our culture, our politics, and our hope for the future.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son . . . Jesus embodies God's desire that people may have life and have it abundantly. Jesus begins by providing a huge quantity of wine for a wedding, an archetypal celebration of life, love, and commitment. His feeding and healings are about sustaining, restoring, and enhancing life for anyone in need, without regard for their religion, race, gender, power, wealth, or status.

For God so loved the world . . . God's love of the world is unqualified. From the beginning the horizon of God's love embraces all things, all life, and all people. The good news is that we—all people—are held in a loving regard which we cannot coerce or fight off. We—all people—are set free to see and to accept our finitude, our limitation, our mortality, and to accept the assurance that we—all people—are held by a love which invites us truly to be ourselves.

For God so loved the world . . . is not the revelation of a "theory of everything," an intellectual or practical system which tells us everything worth knowing. It is, instead, the irrupting into historical life of God's pure, selfless love for us in Christ. In this love we encounter the one foundational reality which challenges, upsets, and transforms our lives until all people are free.