

“The Snake that Bit You...”

Sermon: Year B, Lent 4

Texts: Numbers 21:4–9, John 3:14–21

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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock, our strength, our redeemer. AMEN

Next weekend is a snakey kind of weekend. Saturday, we celebrate the feast day of St. Patrick of Ireland, who is reported to have driven all the snakes out of Ireland. A friend sent me a Shoebox cartoon drawing that shows a frustrated St. Patrick at the wheel of a car filled with snakes in the back seat saying things like, “I’m hungry,” “I have to pee,” “He’s touching me!” and “Are we there yet?” with a caption that reads, “Saint Patrick regrets his decision to drive the snakes out of Ireland.”

And then we come to today’s Old Testament reading, an odd kind of story with more snakes than you can shake a stick at...though Moses does end up shaking a stick at them, I guess, doesn’t he? The people of Israel have been wandering for almost 40 years after being led out of slavery in Egypt. And like the snakes in that cartoon, they are whining...complaint upon complaint. They’ve been complaining to Moses for years, since the beginning of their journey. They didn’t like the bitter water they found in the desert, so God showed Moses how to sweeten it for them. They complained about the lack of food, so God gave them manna to eat every day. Then they complained they were thirsty, so Moses struck the rock at God’s command and water gushed forth for them to drink. They got tired of manna, and started complaining that they wanted meat, so God stirred up a wind that brought them quails to eat...though I’ll note that in the story God did kind of toss in a small plague at the same time. God’s patience was wearing thin, I guess!

But the people didn’t really learn from that experience. And now here we are at the final complaint in the whole story of the wandering journey to the Promised Land. They’re almost there. The journey’s almost over. But the people have gotten impatient...their “spirits have grown short,” the text says. And they begin to make the same complaints as before, but now for the first time they speak out against God and against their leader Moses, and say, “Why have *you* brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There’s no bread and no water, and we hate this crummy food.” They’re referring to the manna that God has been providing for them every single day, and implicit in their complaint is that they’re actually longing to be back in slavery.

So the story says that God has had it up to here with their complaining and their lack of gratitude for God’s providing and for their almost total lack of trust in God’s guidance, and as a consequence, hordes of poisonous snakes appear in the camp and start biting everybody, and people are dropping like flies. The same “Let’s Go Back to Egypt” committee that went to Moses to complain in the first place now comes and acknowledges that they have sinned, and begs that Moses do something, that he intervene to ask God to take the serpents away. So Moses prays for the people. And God does respond...but notice that what God does instead of taking the snakes away is to tell Moses to make the bronze image of a poisonous serpent—the very thing they’re wanting to avoid—and to put it on a pole and lift it up, and to carry it through the middle of the suffering people. God promises healing to everyone who will look up to this serpent on a pole and trust God’s promise. So Moses moves through the camp, holding up the pole with the bronze serpent on it, and all those who have been poisoned who look on it are healed. The image of the thing they are most afraid of, the very thing that is killing them, the dreaded thing that is the direct consequence of their behavior and their lack of faith, becomes their means of healing, becomes their salvation. God heals them, even though they were worthy of God’s condemnation and anger.

How many times do our own spirits “grow short”? We feel like we’re wandering aimlessly in a wilderness, sometimes; we feel so far from our goals, and nothing seems to be going right for us. And we begin to complain and whine, even about the good things that God has placed in our lives out of love for us. We forget that God is guiding us to the place where God would have us be, and that God is providing for us all along that journey. We stop trusting in God and in God’s goodness. We fail to see the consequences of the choices we make and the evil that we do. We all have the toxins of this broken world coursing through our veins. In spite of that, God continues to love us and to provide, and God continues to offer us healing.

And then the snake shows up again in the reading from the gospel of John. I'll bet you didn't really even notice it there. That's the way with snakes, isn't it? "If it had been a snake, it would have bitten you!" We often read right past the snake in this passage, because we're trying to get straight to the Good News of John 3:16, the world's most famous Bible verse. It's a beautiful verse, one that we should teach our children, one that we ourselves should cling to—and it should mean more than a shorthand slogan on a poster waved at a sporting event or painted on a quarterback's cheeks. It's Good News. But you can't really understand that verse without stopping to see the snake. Pull out your bulletins, if you will, and look at it.

First, look at v. 16. We tend to read "God *so* loved the world that..." as "God loved the world *so very much* that..." But what the original Greek text really says is that "God loved the world—the whole cosmos, it says, actually—in *this way*: that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." The love that's being talked about there is not a feeling, it's not talking about the degree of affection and love God has for us, though that is infinite...no, the love in this verse is an *action*...this is talking about *how* God showed that infinite love to the cosmos. And to understand that action, you have to back up to v.14. God showed that love for the cosmos, for us and all of creation, by giving Jesus, God's own Son, to be lifted up on a pole in the middle of our wilderness, just as Moses lifted up that bronze serpent, so that we could look on it and trust God's promise, and be healed, and live.

You see, when Jesus was hung on that cross, lifted up on that pole, what was hung there was the very thing we are most afraid of, the very thing that poisons our lives: what was hung there was death itself—death that is the consequence of our brokenness, of our rebellion, of our selfishness, death that is the punishment we justly deserved. What is hung on the cross is the poisonous venom of humanity's sinfulness. We don't ever want to look on that, do we? We don't want to see the thing that shames us so, we don't want to see the thing that we fear so, we don't want to see the thing that poisons us. But Jesus, the One who knew no sin, becomes sin, becomes the image of everything that poisons us and our lives...for us. Jesus, the Lord of Life, becomes the very image of death...for us. But by becoming death for us, Christ has opened to us the way of eternal life, has become the antidote to death itself, becomes our cure. And God's promise is that if we look on that, if we turn our eyes away from ourselves and look on Jesus lifted up just like the bronze serpent, and trust God's promise of forgiveness and mercy and love, that we'll be saved. One more Greek lesson: the word that we translate "saved" doesn't have anything to do with getting a ticket to heaven. The word for "saved" here is the exactly the same word as for "healed." In the scriptures, salvation is healing from all that is broken. Salvation is wholeness, and restoration. And in Hebrew, Jesus' name, Yeshua, means "God saves, God delivers." In Christ Jesus, God is offering us a promise of healing from the ancient poison of death itself, healing from all those things that bite us, all those things that would seek to take away from us the fullness of life that God has promised from the very beginning. And we can know that healing and wholeness now...we don't need to wait.

God, instead of sending us punishment and death, sends us a means of healing, and a means of living. God does not desire our death and destruction, and does not condemn us, but offers us the promise of healing from the ancient curse of death and from the consequences of our sin. God loves all that God has made, and so God is willing to go through death and destruction, to be lifted up, so that we, and in fact, all of creation, can be healed and restored. "God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which God loved us even when we were dead because of our trespasses, has made us alive together with Christ...by grace, you have been saved." I announce it to you week after week. Hear the promise, and believe. Look straight on at the thing you most fear, and be healed from your bondage to that fear. By God's grace, by Jesus who was lifted up, you have been healed. Jesus came not to punish, not to condemn, but to become the very emblem of God's promise of great love to us. It is great Good News. It is God's promise to you. Look on God's promise of life, and live fully, healed and restored. AMEN