

Take away the serpents

The people of Israel had been traveling through the wilderness for a long, long, time. It had not always been an easy journey; in fact, they had gone through some real hardships. But they had also seen God's presence and power along the way. It was God who freed them from slavery in Egypt. It was God who had been leading them and providing them with everything they needed.

Still, the Israelites were very human. So, throughout this time in the wilderness, whenever things got rough, they would begin to doubt, and become afraid, and then they would complain and murmur against Moses and God. When they were hungry, God told them, "Here, I am sending you manna, and there will always be enough for your daily needs." But after a while, the people complained, "Oh for the food we used to enjoy back in Egypt. We used to have meat, and cucumbers, onions. Now we have to settle for manna." Then God sent quails into their camp for them to eat; so plentiful they came down from the sky like rain. Every evening, they had quails for meat, and every morning they had manna for bread. God had set them free from their bondage in Egypt, but when times got hard, the people would long for the good old days.

Today we heard from chapter 21 in the Book of Numbers, but if you go back just one chapter, you will find an example of what I am talking about. The people once more were complaining to Moses and to God. They said, "Why did you bring us out into the desert to die? There is no grain, there are no figs, or pomegranates. And now we don't have water." God instructed Moses to strike the rock with his staff, and water flowed out abundantly, enough for all the people and all their animals. Next, God gave the Israelites victory over the Canaanites, and they set out on their way again.

It doesn't take long, however, before the people grow impatient, and the grumbling starts up again. In today's lesson they speak out against the Lord and 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 (meaning, the manna, and quails)."

Remember, these are the people who witness God work all the wonders in Egypt – all the plagues and all the miracles. This is the people that used to be slaves, until God set them free. They had walked through the Red Sea on dry land, and watched God destroy the armies of pharaoh. God provided food for them every day. When they were thirsty, they watched Moses strike the rock and the water gushed out.

The scriptures indicate that God had about enough of Israel's bad behavior, and so, around this time, poisonous snakes began to appear in the camp, and the snakes started biting the people, and many of the people died. Now the story states that the Lord sent the serpents among the people. I have to admit that I am not sure about that. To me, it doesn't seem to be consistent with the God who is always faithful to Israel, the God who always offers life, and freedom, and forgiveness, and healing. The way I see it, if God sent poisonous snakes upon us every time we humans complained or grew impatient or unfaithful, then the scriptures and all of church history would have endless stories of reptile invasions. Jesus' own disciples had times of being impatient or slow to believe or lacking in faith, but there are no stories of them constantly fighting off snakes.

The writer of the book of Numbers saw this invasion of snakes as God judging the people. Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn't. Did God send this hardship, or was it just something that happened as part of their journey? After all, when you travel through the wilderness year after year, you are going to encounter your share of snakes, and some of them are going to be poisonous. We don't know exactly *why* there were

snakes, and to be honest, we don't really need to know. The important thing is not where the snakes came from. The point is, the snakes did come, and they started biting people, causing pain and death. This got the attention of the Israelites in a hurry. And they began to pray. How human! Our lives can be going along, but out of nowhere there suddenly arises some suffering or hardship. And it gets our attention. We are moved to prayer. And if there are parts of our lives that need some turning around, we may be moved to repentance as well. It was this way for Israel, too.

So, the Israelites pray, and they repent. They go to Moses and confess, "We have sinned by speaking against God and against you. We are sorry. Now please, pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." Take away the serpents. Please, Moses, ask God to help and get us out of this trouble. Take away the serpents.

But God does something surprising. Listen again to the scripture: Moses prayed for the people – that the snakes would be removed. 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 on a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent and live.

Nowhere does the scripture say that God got rid of the snakes. In fact, God did *not* get rid of the serpents. What God says is, "Everyone who is bitten shall look at the snake and live." And the story repeats this. It does not say, "Thanks be to God, there were no more snake bites." It states, whenever a serpent bit someone, they would look at the snake and live. There were still snakes. And those snakes could still bite. God did not take away the serpents; God said, "Look at the snake and live."

This is something that we wouldn't have imagined. Take a snake, Moses is told by the Lord, and place it on a pole for all to see. I want you to look on the very thing that

has bitten you. Look at the very thing that can hurt and cause pain, and even kill you. Look at it. Look long and hard. Keep your eyes on it. Here is wisdom: *this* is the very place you will find redemption. *This* is the place of your healing. Look at the serpent and live.

Psychologically and theologically, this is brilliant. In order for us to truly deal with suffering, we must face it, and embrace it, and move through it. Those people who have gone through real suffering know this is true. Talk with anyone who has experienced the death of a loved one, or who has known the tragedy of a life-changing illness, in their own body or in the life of someone close to them. Ask someone who has done the long, difficult work of recovering from addiction. They will tell you, there is no way through it, but to go through it. You can't run away from the suffering; you cannot expect someone to magically remove it. No. Here is the thing that bites you – and you must look at it. Here is what has hurt you, what has threatened to harm you. Look at it. Here is your pain, here is your addiction, your weakness, your sin. If you want to find healing, you need to look at it.

What is truth in small ways is truth in a larger way. So, for the people of Israel, looking at the serpent on a pole brought healing to those who have been bitten. Doing the hard work of facing a personal struggle, that is where we come to a place of healing and new life. Jesus teaches this is true at a universal level. He teaches, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent on the pole in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted on the cross. And whoever believes in Christ – the crucified one, the suffering one, whoever looks at this shall have eternal life.” Keep your eyes on this, he is telling us. Here is human suffering and death. Here is the cross. Look on it. This is where you will find life. The serpent brings healing from a snakebite. Facing one's own demons brings freedom and healing. The Christ, on the cross, brings to everyone the hope and promise of new life and resurrection.

It is natural for us to pray, “God, take away the serpents.” But God gives us instead a snake to look at and be with. We might want to pray, “God, there is so much suffering and sorrow and death in the world, take that away, too.” But God doesn’t. Instead, God becomes human, embraces our humanity in the person of Jesus, and then gives us Jesus, the human one, on the cross. God takes on in human flesh the very thing we would rather avoid – suffering and pain and death – and God says to us, here, look on this, and be healed. Embrace this and live. That is the message of the cross.

The truth is, there is suffering in life. We all have our snakes that will bite us and our crosses to bear. Good religion teaches people what to do with their suffering. If your religion, if your spirituality doesn’t teach you what to do with your suffering, then what good is it? Good religion teaches us what to do when we encounter the hardships that come to every life.

This is hard news because it is about suffering and death. And this is good news because it reaches even into suffering and death. Our God is with us on our journey. Our God is with us amid the serpents that life bites us with. Our God is with us through suffering and tragedy and pain and death. Here what God is saying to us: “Behold the cross. Here is your hope. Here is your salvation. Here is the way to new life.”

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. May we look to the cross, may we look to Christ, and live. Amen.

Trace Browning

Year B – 4th Sunday in Lent

Numbers 21:4-9 • Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 • Ephesians 2:1-10 • John 3:14-21

Preached at All Saints Episcopal Church – Salt Lake City, Utah

10 March 2024