

SERMON
FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT – YEAR B
“SNAKE BIT”
NUMBERS 21: 4-9 / MARCH 11, 2018

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Such a weird story, in the Book of Numbers – this tale of snakes. It’s a terribly odd story, but one that does catch the imagination. It captured Jesus’ imagination, and he used the bronze snake as a symbol of himself lifted up on the cross. Just what is this wild story about?

Let’s begin by looking at the Israelites who had been delivered from slavery in Egypt. These people sure knew how to whine. They whined about the food, that is the manna God sent them each day, about the water, or at least the lack of it, about the living conditions, and about each other. It reminds me of a saying, “Language evolved so that people could complain.”

The people complained about everything. They especially complained about their leadership. Poor old Moses heard their criticism over and over again. Then came the snakes. These serpents bit people, and some died. They saw this as God’s judgement; a questionable theology. Then they appealed to Moses to make it stop. So, Moses appealed to God, and God told him to make a bronze serpent and place it on a pole.

In my research on this odd little story, I discovered more than one writer suggesting it is meant to explain how a community, any community, can be poisoned in some way, shape, or form – often by its own doing. The snake, in ancient cultures, and in the Judeo-Christian tradition, often symbolizes evil. So, when snakes overrun the camp, we might imagine it as symbolic of the evil that has entered the camp.

What plays out in this story is this tangible metaphor – snakes – those poisonous, destructive thoughts and attitudes of the people. One writer suggests this evil was, for these ancient Israelites, the backbiting and resistance to their faithful leaders. Rather than adhering to the wisdom of their leaders who were faithful to God's desires and preferences, they raised up their own desires and preferences to the point that they become their own Gods controlling their lives and the lives of others. It happens among the nations of the world. It happens in our families. It happens in congregations.

And we often don't even recognize these preferences and desires that control us, in distorted, twisted ways. Certain attitudes or behaviours can serve to turn us against, or distract us from, the most important things for us as people of faith that being the unremitting love of God and love of our neighbour. Sometimes it's our closest neighbours, or often members of our own families, who are caught up in self-destructive behaviours and who, in love and genuine care, need to be challenged about the harmful things they do, so that they may live instead knowing they are claimed and loved by God.

The Israelites were indulging in complaint, denying the priorities of community life, and resisting the leadership with which they were blessed. These were the snakes that bit them and, once bit, things got worse. Some even died. Things got worse until some of them started to realize that their actions were destructive to others, and then they started to understand this destruction as God's judgement against them. But perhaps the judgement, as it is in many of the circumstances we create for ourselves, was simply the logical consequences of that behaviour which opposes God's will for the people.

Then we come up against this really strange part of the story. But it's also, I think, where the primary lesson from this story is found for our daily living. God has Moses construct a bronze snake, and has him set it on a pole. Everyone who is bitten by a snake is to look at the bronze snake, for in doing so they will be healed. Scarred, but healed. In other words, Moses makes a replica of the very evil the people feared. So, the bronze snake was raised up among them, not as an object of worship or a magic talisman, but as a reminder that once bit by the things that drove them apart, they had to be intentional about working together in order to survive and, indeed, to be the people of God.

They had to confront the poisonous evil in their midst, confront that evil and get rid of it. Thursday, march 8th was International Women's Day. Among the themes of the day were: gender parity and calling out those guilty of sexual discrimination. And of course, we are aware of the 'me too' movement bringing to the world's attention the ongoing sexual harassment and misconduct that women suffer so often. The snake of sexual

discrimination; the poison of sexual harassment and assault are being lifted up for all to see. Like Moses lifting up the bronze snake on the pole so that all who gazed on it were healed; so as we lift up the poison of this way of relating between men and women we – all of us – men and women stand to be healed.

I can't but compare the snake on a pole to the life-sized statue of a bathrobe-clad Harvey Weinstein, seated regally on a couch with an Oscar in one hand. It served to spotlight the entertainment industry's sexual misconduct crisis and the disgraced studio mogul's role in it. Lifting up this icon, this symbol of this poison pervading society is at the same time an empowering reminder of the efforts that must be made to call to account those who use their power to oppress others and to work toward eliminating such oppressive behaviour.

We have to be able to clearly see and recognize the evil in our midst; confront it head on as individuals and as a society and from that we can receive healing and move a bit closer to being the people God would have us be.

The people of ancient Israel had an ambivalent view of snakes. They lived in an arid land, perfect for vipers, and for that reason had occasion to run into them on a fairly regular basis. They lived side-by-side with the creatures, and had a more intimate relationship with these reptiles than do you and I. So, on the one hand they symbolized 'evil' and the poisonous effect of evil to spread throughout a community. On the other hand, snakes were also viewed as symbols of protection.

The pharaoh in Egypt often wore a head piece that displayed a hooded cobra. The snake was there to protect the pharaoh, to spit venom at his enemies should they try to hurt him. Ancient people realized the irony in snakes. The venom found in snakes is, at the same time, the source of medicine by which snake bites can be healed, so the symbol of the two intertwined snakes is used even today by the medical profession. If any of you have ever had surgery, as one person puts it, “you know that if you get mixed up with these people who work under the symbol of two snakes intertwined on a pole, they often hurt you in order to heal you.”

Sometimes we have to experience pain to have healing. We have seen that in all sorts of life experiences such as the testimony of residential school survivors, the therapeutic interventions for folks suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, or the women who have courageously come forward to speak up in the ‘me too’ movement.

Jesus pointed out the complexity of human life in his parables. He made it clear that this is the nature of salvation...that in the hands of God, evil and good, threat and promise, life and death are all somehow mixed up together. Our gospel reading today is taken from a conversation Jesus had with the religious leader, Nicodemus, who comes to see Jesus at night. Nicodemus would have known this story of Moses and the snakes, and probably is quite shocked that Jesus would use it as an analogy for himself. It has been suggested that Jesus may have thought of this story because of the nature in which Nicodemus has come to see him....at night, slithering in quietly under cover of darkness, not wanting anyone to know he has come to see the controversial Galilean. So, Jesus speaks to him of

slithering serpents, darkness, death, light, life and salvation, all mixed up together in him.

Theologian, William Willimon tries his best to explain all this. He says, “The Gospel of John therefore refers to Jesus, not only as the good shepherd, but also as the good snake. He surprised us, came in among us, slithering in to our illusions of stability and safety.... He opened his mouth, and spoke words that cut us like a sword, venomous, prophetic words. And we beat him, whipped him, and lifted him up high on a pole. And in lifting him up from earth toward heaven, his poisonous, prophetic words of venom became the anti-venom, the means of salvation. And even those who had killed him, standing at the foot of the pole, were able to look up and say, ‘Truly this is the son of God.’”

John’s gospel gives us a new lens through which to hear the story of the bronze snake. I’m not saying the bronze snake was actually Jesus on the cross, or that the story somehow anticipates the crucifixion in any precognitive way. But there is a thematic tie between the snake and the cross. And Jesus recognized that.

In both stories, of the snake and the cross, a cause of death was transformed by God into a symbol of life. The image of the poisonous snake, the thing that had been so deadly, became for the Israelites in the wilderness an image that promised healing and life. In the Christian imagination, the cross was eventually transformed from an instrument of oppression, torture and execution to a vital symbol that reminds us of God’s promise of resurrection and restoration.

It is, indeed, a strange little story in the Book of Numbers. And it leaves us with some troubling questions: the suggestion that God punishes the Israelites by sending a plague of poisonous snakes to them; the strange, magical source of healing; The question of whether or not God asks Moses to violate the commandment to not make a graven image.

Still, I see a glimmer of why this story was kept alive in the imagination of the Israelites such that it was included in the Hebrew scriptures. The one thing, the one enemy we all share is death itself – those things that diminish life or that extinguish or harm our ability to live well, in harmony and peace with ourselves and others. And God, this story tells us, puts death, puts the evil that brings death – on its head. This story announces that God brings to us new, vibrant, resurrection life. Thanks, and praise be to God! Amen.

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