



“Snakes, a Cross, and a Resurrection”

Texts: Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-21

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

I think it is important to start this morning with some background to what is going on in Numbers that leads to the passage we heard this morning. This story of the snakes and the bronze snake that Moses holds up comes toward the end of the Israelites' time in the desert. We know that throughout the forty years they would grumble and complain, God would get mad, there would be some sort of punishment, and then the people would repent. This is what is happening in this passage.

However, their complaints are more than grumbling. They are showing through their words and actions that they don't trust God or Moses. "We're tired of being thirsty when there isn't enough water and we're tired of this terrible food. Enough with the manna. It doesn't seem like you know what you're doing, Moses or God. You don't seem to know where we're supposed to be going. All we're doing is wandering around in the wilderness. It would have been better if we had just stayed in Egypt. Perhaps we should go back to Egypt. Back to where we had food, even if the life wasn't what we really want. It is known and we can survive."

Can we really blame them for grumbling, for questioning God and Moses on the sanity of what they were living through? Would we not do the same? And do we not do the same when life gets tough? What are you doing, God? Why am I going through this? I'm wandering in the wilderness and you don't seem to be leading me forward. It feels like I'm just going in circles." Does that sound familiar? Have you perhaps been there once or twice yourself?

But God is fed up with their complaining and sends in the venomous snakes. To give you a better understanding of why God is so frustrated at this point is that in chapter 14, after asking forgiveness yet again, they set out to attack the Canaanites despite the fact that Moses had told them not to do so, that they did not have the blessing of God with them and they would be defeated. Their confession of sin was shallow. They believed they could fulfill the promises of God through their own efforts, without God's help. They failed to understand the deeper source of their sin, their unwillingness to trust God to deliver them and to fulfill God's commandments to bring them into the Promised Land. Their lives just got a whole lot harder when they defied God and went ahead and attacked the Canaanites. When that wasn't going well, they cried out to God to intervene.

I remember in a religion course in college the professor talking about mountaintop experiences and how they bring us closer to God, but it is not just those experiences that have the opportunity to bring us closer to God. In a very real sense it is the desert experiences, those days or weeks, months or even years of being in the desert, of having to completely rely on God to see us through, that helps us to see God more clearly as we have to draw to God more completely to live.

One woman I got to know told me her story of being in the desert. Her husband left her and that was the start of her time in the wilderness. She said her daughter got erratic in her behavior and that began a long journey of finding help for her daughter's mental health needs, her mother got cancer and she had little help from siblings in caring for her, and eventually the stress of it all led her son to delve into drugs. She also found herself jobless at one point and when her husband stopped sending child support, she lost her home. After the devastation of the divorce people would say to her, "It will get better." After the journey began of her daughter's mental health needs, people would say, "It will get better." And this continued. The saying eventually changed to, "You've been through so much. Nothing more can happen." to "You've been through so much, it's got to start changing." She said those words didn't bring her comfort because there was no way of knowing when or even if things would change for her or for her kids and mother. After seven long years, life changed. Her mother had passed, but her daughter was stable on meds and her son had beaten drugs and was finally living a healthy and productive life. She was finally settled as a single person in a job and home and she was happy again.

She said what happened to her spiritually during this time is that while she at times wrestled with God over what was happening, she knew there was nowhere else to go but to the foot of the cross; to turn to God and cling to the One whom she had given her life to. She said that in the desert, she had found God in a new way. It was seven years in the desert for her. And while she wouldn't wish those years on anyone, she is grateful for the blessing of faith.

We journey through the desert. We walk through the snakes fearful of being bitten, but that is because we are looking down instead of up. Moses held up the bronze snake on the pole for the people to see. It was in looking up at that they were able to live and not be killed by the snakes.

In our reading from John, in his talk with the religious leader, Nicodemus, Jesus says, "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven - the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

Now the snake as a symbol is an interesting one. We know that it was the snake, the serpent, in the Garden of Eden that led Adam and Eve astray. It was the snake that brought us down into sin and death. And yet that isn't the only symbol that the snake has. Think about the medical symbol that has the two snakes on it. If you Google why the snakes are a symbol for the medical field, you would read different reasons, but on PubMed Central it says, "The answer lies deep sown in history when Moses, around 1400 BC, used the bronze serpent erected on the pole to cure the people bitten by snakes." The serpent wrapped around the pole to depict health for the medical field and to bring life to the people of Israel.

And so the serpent on the pole that brings life to the people, Jesus equates to himself as the one who will be lifted up. In his telling of being lifted up, there is a double meaning. He will be lifted up on the Cross and Crucified and he will be lifted up in Resurrection from death. The cross now signifies both the poison of death as well as the life-giving power of God for all who believe and look to God for healing and new life.

This is why these readings this morning are so essential to our understanding of Lent, Holy Week, Easter. It is a time of reflection and through that reflection it becomes a time of true repentance, a turning away from the snakes on the ground and a turning toward the snake on the pole, the Christ on the Cross and then the empty Cross.

I know some of your stories, things you are living through now, caring for loved ones with dementia or Alzheimers. Living with cancer or caring for someone with cancer. Living with the challenges of life transitions that are difficult and scary. Living with loss of a loved one and the grief that goes with that. It is the desert you are now in.

And for this congregation there is this in between time, which seems to be the desert for many of you. I hear the murmurings: We can't move forward until we have a minister in place. Will the church survive? We have so many older members. What is to become of us? Why can't we hire Jerusha, which I hear as the same as Israelites cry, "We know what to expect in Egypt." She represents the known and that brings a sense of comfort.

But all these comments come from focusing on the snakes on the ground instead of looking to the serpent lifted up, the Christ lifted up, the empty cross lifted up. God is calling on you to repent from having such little faith and to instead believe that God is doing a good thing, even now as I speak. Where was God when we wandered after Kevin's death? God was here, providing faithful leadership first through Wendy and John and now through me. Does the pastoral leadership know where you are going? Yes! You are going to the Promised Land. The Israelites wandered for forty years. Is this time in transition so very long after all? You have been moving forward toward the Promised Land and that is because God has led by providing leaders, not just in the pastoral staff but with the Elders who have been doing an outstanding job. While you may not be able to recognize all that has been and is being done, there is a lot going on and it is all good.

God is leading this church into a new future; and while I know that you love Jerusha, you need to accept that God is doing a great thing in her as well and is leading her into a new future that God has been preparing her for not just during these past few years at seminary, but from all she has gained from being in relationship with you. So celebrate the ties that bind and pray for her as she seeks out God's path for her, but also pray for the new pastor that God will lead here - a pastor with experience and passion and wisdom to help you go from where you are now into a new and bright future. Look up. Keep your eyes on the Cross lifted high. There is new life coming. Use this time in the desert, whether it be your own personal desert or the desert the congregation is traversing through, to look up and find God. God is there providing healing and new life. Believe! God is doing a new thing. That is the Easter message. Amen.

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