

Snakes and Salvation

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

This lectionary selection from Numbers comes up every three years. I could have sworn that I had preached on these texts at least once before, but I have no record of it in going back 20 years. I've dodged it every time. And the reason is pretty obvious. It's the snakes.

I was fondly hoping that a daily devotional based on the upcoming Sunday lectionary texts would dwell on the snakes. Alas, no, the devotional writer also dodged the snakes. It would be inappropriate for me to criticize that dodginess since I'm guilty of the same offense.

Let's face it: the snake-on-a-stick passage from Numbers 21 is a profound oddity, and when there is the entirety of the Bible to choose from, why the lectionary people chose this weird text is a deep mystery. But the time has come to face the unapproached text and deal with it, and you must endure as a result.

Snakes or serpents are nothing new in scripture. We meet the wily serpent in the Garden of Eden, of course. But God's people had a thing about snakes. Let's remember that the book of Numbers was not written anytime near Moses, more like during the period of the monarchy, and completed during the period of the Persian occupation following the Babylonian exile. There are references to a snake prominently displayed in the temple which King Hezekiah, during his reform, had destroyed. Archaeology unearthed loot taken from Israel that included a vessel with snake imagery.

As interesting as all that may be, we still have snakes making a strange appearance as God's people are wrapping up their long period of wandering in the wilderness following the Exodus from Egypt prior to taking the Promised Land.

We know that God's people were constantly complaining along the way. 'We're hungry,' they said, and God sent manna and quail. 'We're thirsty,' they said, and God made water come from a rock. When Moses went up to the mountaintop to receive the Ten Commandments, they said, 'We're bored,' and they had a wild party like the parents weren't home, and forged a golden calf to be their new god. Then it was like the parents came home and the party ended quickly and poorly.

You quickly get the impression that God's people on the wilderness journey were like a bunch of kids in the car on a long road trip. They're hungry. They're thirsty. They're bored. They have to go potty. They have to go potty again. They're hungry. They're thirsty. They're bored. And of course, they have to go potty again. And they murmur constantly, 'Are we there yet?'

God and Moses, like the parents in the front seat, are really getting tired of this. The journey is in fact going to be done soon, but not soon enough. The murmuring starts again. 'We've been going around in circles for years and years. We're never going to get

there. Maybe this whole thing is just a waste of time. We could at least have a few comforts if we were back in Egypt. But, oh-no, Moses and Yahweh are dragging us around this awful desert.'

Without any warning, it would seem that God snapped. And when God snaps, it isn't going to be like a red-faced dad in the car who, while still driving, twists around to glare in the backseat at the kids and scream, "Shut up!" That would have been understandable. Instead, this is God, and God simply unleashes swarms of snakes on God's people. It isn't wise to speculate what God may be thinking at any given time, but I'm willing to be unwise. I'm guessing God has decided to give these ungrateful, complaining, muttering people something to really complain about. Snakes.

These poisonous snakes are biting God's people and killing them. God's people realize that they must have crossed a line. Y'think? They say to Moses: *We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.* And Moses prays for them. God tells Moses to put a snake-on-a-stick and set it before the people. When people have been bitten, and look to the snake-on-a-stick, they'll be healed. Moses makes a snake from bronze, a material which I guess was handy out there in the desert, and a material with which Moses knew how craft a snake – unknown metallurgy skills, eh? – and the snake-on-a-stick was forged and set before the people. When they got bit – ouch – they would look at the snake-on-a-stick and be healed. Ah.

There are lots of things we could talk about since commentators have gone nuts trying to find the best way to understand this. But let's not.

Let me focus on an irony that appears in the story. Snakes are biting God's people and killing them. How will they gain salvation from this wretched situation? By following God's instructions which is make a snake according to God's way and look to it when stricken in order to be healed and saved. The snakes are their problem, and a snake by God's design is their healing and salvation. In both cases, it's snakes.

Remember that God's people were always complaining about one thing or another. They were never satisfied with what God had provided them. They always seemed to want something more. Yet God had provided them with enough, even *more than* enough. They took their blessings for granted, and in the process took God for granted. They would only find satisfaction and fulfillment when they understood that God had provided all that they needed. Instead they had corrupted that generous abundance by making it inadequate and insufficient.

This is what we do all the time, and have been doing since the beginning. In the first creation story in Genesis 1, God made all things, and after each act of creation, God pronounces what was created "good." God does not look upon God's creation and say, "Well, that sucked." No, in God's goodness, God made all things good. However, we may look upon that same creation – and often have over time, including the present – and declared, "Well, that sucks," and then gone about "fixing" it. The Everglades is such a colossal mess, not because of anything God did, but because of stupid human

interventions that would supposedly make the Everglades better for us. Global climate change is bringing devastating storms and increasingly erratic weather patterns. I'm sure that God resents that the damage from these storms is called an "act of God." God didn't create climate change; we did, ignoring all the warnings as some still dismiss them today, that we are over-heating the planet's atmosphere. We dealt with the ozone layer that we were causing to decrease and now it's slowly recovering, but not so with climate change. And now it's probably too late.

I could go on, but you get the point. God provided us with abundance, just as God provided God's wilderness journeying people with everything they needed, but God's people then, like God's people now, are not satisfied with what God has provided. God made this point using snakes to cause God's people to turn to God who then gave them a snake to look at that would bring them salvation. One snake was caused by their constant complaining, and the other was the snake of salvation that God provided. (Admittedly, however, not one of God's better strategies in teaching God's people a lesson.)

Let's see how this works out in the passage from John 3. This chapter begins with the arrival of Pharisee inquirer Nicodemus at Jesus' door at night. Their strained discussion has Jesus answering the questions that Nicodemus *should* have asked rather than the somewhat dumb questions that Nicodemus does ask. The selection for today is the continuation of the conversation with Nicodemus which, in typical John fashion, goes on and on and on.

The tie to the snake passage in Numbers comes from Jesus' mentioning that passage. But before we get there, let's back up and hear what Jesus tells Nicodemus before mentioning snake-on-a-stick.

Jesus has gotten quite frustrated with Nicodemus's failure to grasp what he's been telling him. Jesus disgustedly claims: *If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*

Presumably Nicodemus is trying to figure out how the things that Jesus is talking about relate to the Torah-Law and he isn't making any connections. Jesus is trying to get him in the flow of his thinking, but clearly isn't succeeding. In essence, Jesus is saying, 'there are things happening right before your eyes which you seem to be choosing not to believe or understand. If I can't show you from earthly things how God has provided a new way in the gospel – in the good news I bear with me – how can I get you to see how God's plan is working out for your benefit?'

To Jesus, Nicodemus is like the wilderness people who complain about things going on around them, mindlessly dismissing all of what God has done and is doing before their very eyes. God's plan is working out here and now just as it was when the snakes came upon God's people. This leads Jesus to say: *And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

Then Jesus exclaims: *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.* Jesus is the snake-on-a-stick for Nicodemus and this generation, but those who are in authority, like Nicodemus, can't see it, don't get it, and won't get it. So, whenever you see the clichéd John 3:16, or someone quotes it to you, just remember snake-on-a-stick.

But Jesus isn't finished. He continues: *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* Jesus and his mission are not about condemnation which some Christians are prone to forgetting. One could say, as Paul seems to indicate, that the Torah-Law can be used, or rather **abused**, for the purposes of condemning rather than directing, guiding and leading people to the path of love, grace, justice, and peace. Jesus' mission was to lead people out of the darkness of condemnation and into the light of God's love and grace.

Now having just said this is not about condemnation, we then hear how there is condemnation: *Those who believe in [the Son] are not condemned; but those who do not believe **are** condemned **already**, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.* 'Huh?' we say with Nicodemus.

He continues: *And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.* Here it is again. People like their own version of things, their own perceived reality, and refuse to see how different things may actually be from what they believe to be true, even when clear evidence is placed before their very eyes. God's people in the desert wilderness believed they were beset with miserable conditions and were suffering, indeed being tortured by their God. Even though God had provided them with whatever they needed, they loved their imagined suffering so much that God decided some snakes might get them change their viewpoint. Again, not a great approach (don't try this at home), but it worked.

If what we're doing is making a complete mess of what God intended, then we need to act to change, to turn, to repent, and begin focusing on what God is doing right before our very eyes. The power of light and love, the blessings of grace and abundance, and the spirit of justice and peace have been set before us in Jesus, our Lord and Savior. When we look up from our sometimes imagined trials and tribulations, forgoing the pity party and all the fun spiritual funk that entails, and gain liberty from the need to be a poor, innocent victim who deserves a break, then we come to know what God has done for us, what God would do with us, and how God has ably provided for us. Most of all, we should realize that God so loved us that he sent his only Son, and not a swarm of snakes. Maybe God learned after that one.