

March 14, 2021

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

What are We Going to do with All These Snakes?

Ever since I was a kid, I have been intrigued by snakes. Growing up in the south and spending a lot of time outdoors and in the woods, I had a lot more interaction with snakes and quickly learned to tell the difference between the poisonous ones and the non-poisonous ones. In the Spring, I would search for them, pick them up, play with them.

But in the 25 years that I have been preaching, I have avoided this story in Numbers about snakes. I find it bizarre, weird and troublesome. I haven't been able to make sense of it. But since Jesus referred to it in our Gospel and used it as a lead in to the most famous verse in the Bible (John 3:16), I decided it was time to handle these snakes.

If you are uncomfortable around snakes, this might not be your Sunday! But, if you can set that discomfort aside, you will be treated to an insight about how the ancient Hebrew Bible reading from Numbers connects with the Gospel reading from John.

Remember the context of Numbers. The Israelites are fleeing their brutal enslavement in Egypt. This is their flight to freedom and they are in the middle of a tougher experience than most of us will ever have. The people of the Hebrews were fleeing through the desert, and their wilderness wanderings were plagued by lack of food and water. And now snakes. Why? Because they complained against the God who was delivering them.

So, when was the last time you found yourself in traffic complaining about its slow pace, while your air conditioner or heater hummed, and you listened to satellite radio in stereo? Here you are in your own little island, but you are upset because you can't get to work or home any faster. And while you might not be tripping over snakes, you at least know you're going to get there eventually. The Hebrews didn't even know where "there" was.

Being miserable is something we try to avoid, but how we handle it really hasn't changed much. The power goes off and we call the electric utility and complain. The water is turned off for a few hours because of a water main leak, and we whine at the water company. The waiter tells us they have just run out of the dish we had so looked forward to, so we fuss and grumble as we order another choice from a varied menu.

Okay, so maybe this is a little over the top about complaining, but really – what do we have to complain about? Besides, it's Lent! Aren't we supposed to feel a little miserable?

Like Moses with the Hebrews, somebody prays for us. Somebody offers up our fears of snakes that bite us and frighten us. Somebody breaks the bread and blesses the cup and offers us real spiritual food. The bread is broken, the cup is offered, and we see the sign like the people saw the bronze serpent in the wilderness and lived. We receive the bread and the cup, and our impatience and complaining retreat, even if only for a while.

"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good," proclaims the Psalmist. And if God is good, what he offers us is never a snake that bites us, but the bread of life. "Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress."

Lent is all about who truly delivers us from the hardships we suffer, the complaints we offer, and the peril of the snakes in this world.

Paul writes to the Ephesians, carefully setting up the situation: we are all dead through our sinning because we think the things of this world will save us, keep us comfortable, and drive the snakes away. He describes God as rich in mercy and able in our dead state to make us alive in Christ Jesus, saved and raised up with him. And most of all, we can't cause it by our good works. Rather, God's free gift of Christ on the cross—recalling the serpent lifted up by Moses—brings us salvation. The snakes can't win. Praise God for that.

So, we come to the Gospel reading from John, and the one verse every Christian knows by heart: "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.” This passage is so well known that it is often coded on billboards and in ads as John 3:16 with no text provided.

And that may be the problem. This text taken by itself is almost a romantic rendering of the Gospel, as if somehow God came into the world and erased evil in all its forms from our lives. That leaves us with a lot of questions. Good, well-intentioned, and brave people are killed every day: some by accident, some by violence and mayhem. Simply quoting John 3:16 to their families and friends will not provide a lot of comfort.

The story of the Gospel is about our encounter with it, and how even after hearing it, we may choose evil rather than good. Jesus’ life and ministry are a judgment because despite His being in the world, people still love darkness rather than light, and our deeds are often evil, as John continues to proclaim.

So, Lent is not just a time for us to get closer to Jesus and hope for the best. Lent is a time to embrace the challenge of the Gospel, to swim upstream against all of the world’s downstream current of things that pleasure us and delight us, but never satisfy.

Deep Lent, as some call this time, is when we struggle with the darkness, and may not always find answers to why it is so pervasive. We cannot answer why evil seems so prevalent because we can’t readily see it in our own choices. So, asking to be part of the light will reveal what is hidden in our darkness, and most of us would prefer not to see. That is why self-examination and confession are rare and avoided by most of us. But we have strayed like lost sheep, we have followed too much the desires of our own hearts, to the point where, left on our own, we are truly lost.

So, make today a turning point, an embracing of John 3:16 for your future. If you say this passage every day this week and ask God how to embrace it, you will find a way. You will find it as you receive the bread and the cup. You will find it as you reach out to another human being who is also lost and lonely. You will find a way to move more into the light. You will have different questions to ask, ones for which there are answers.

The only reason Jesus could go to the cross was because He dared to walk into the darkness. We have to do the same if we are going to follow him the rest of the Lenten journey. That means leaving a lot of things behind, including the world's wisdom for how to live in the darkness by making everything pleasant for ourselves.

Somehow, we have to connect with these readings, with the Hebrews who wandered in the desert, unable to deal with the consequences they have brought upon themselves. Somehow, we have to embrace St. Paul who writes in Ephesians about our being dead because we follow the course of the world. And somehow, we have to take what is offered this Sunday, the word and sacrament, and let it begin to work in us so that, in us, Jesus is lifted up.