

**Lent 4. March 11, 2018. Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21.**

I like to think of the lectionary—the calendar that determines when we read which bible passages—as a nefarious scheme cooked up by people who are no longer in parish ministry, to punish those of us who are. So, in my imagination for today, an embittered retired Presbyterian minister teamed up with a frustrated United Methodist scholar to think “Okay, we have to assign John 3:16, about which all preachers have preached too often. So let’s couple it with a story from Numbers about which no preacher in their right mind would ever preach.” Thus, we in pulpits today are dared to try to preach on God sending poisonous snakes to bite picky eaters, or just to leave that story unaddressed, and let y’all figure it out for yourselves. Like the food the Hebrews had available in the wilderness, it is an unappetizing prospect.

This really is a strange story. God has set the Israelites free from bondage in Egypt and Moses has led them out into the wilderness to journey towards the promised land. But they aren’t there yet. On this stage of their journey, they leave from Mount Hor, which in Hebrew actually means “Mount Mountain.” They’ve been wandering for a while and in a complaint that might resonate with parents, they begin to complain “we don’t have any food—and this food that we have is miserable.” So God sends poisonous snakes to bite them, they repent, Moses does this weird homeopathic medicine thing with a snake statue, and it works.

As I have wrestled with this text this week, I have come to see it as an instance of a people struggling to make sense of their suffering. And as is often the case when we think in pain, they don’t quite get it right. The obvious suffering is the acute pain of being bitten by poisonous snakes—a crisis suffering, sudden and terrible. We know all about this: the sudden illness, the death of a loved one, the gut punch of unexpected cruelty. This is the pain that comes out of nowhere and takes over our lives, impossible to forget or miss. But the more subtle suffering is the long monotonous misery of wandering around in the desert, seemingly without direction and with little hope. We know this, too, though it often works more like the chronic pain in a joint that we manage to compensate around. This is the quiet slide to despair of meaningless work, or the invisibly loosening seams of a faltering marriage, or the long grind of persistent poverty.

The folks behind our text valiantly try to interpret these two sufferings. The monotonous misery stems from a lack of patience among the people, a kind of two-way shortsightedness. They do not remember far enough back to the joy of their liberation from Egypt, and do they do not look far enough forward to anticipate the promise of the land that is to come. And the sudden acute pain of the poisonous snakes is attributed to God—an extreme version of “don’t make me turn this car around,” or “I’ll give you

something to cry about.” The lessons learned are that patience is a very high virtue, and that God is likely both to punish and have mercy.

I’m sure that patience is commendable and virtuous and I have a deep reliance on God’s mercy, but I still think that something has gone wrong here. I just don’t think that God sends poisonous snakes to kill people who don’t like their food—if that were so, I can think of a certain toddler who would be bringing a plague of serpents down on my house. The real reason that we read this story today is that Jesus refers to it right before everyone’s favorite bible verse, saying “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.” And with that, what follows gives us a chance to reinterpret the suffering of God’s people in the wilderness, and in turn our own suffering and that of the world.

Unlike our narrator from Numbers, Jesus is completely agnostic on the origin of suffering. He is content to describe God’s response, which is unabashed love. The world is groaning, we are in need of salvation, and in John the burning question is not why, but what now? And the divine what-now is love without limit. Jesus underlines God’s unremitting focus on loving us out of suffering when he says “Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Well that’s great, but what does love do? To put it bluntly, we’d rather have a magic snake statue that saves our lives than a fuzzy feeling shooting through the clouds that does nothing. This is the problem with putting John 3:16 on a poster at a football game—it reduces Jesus to a name, instead of a life. Jesus is divine love incarnate, embodied, and what God’s love does is what Jesus does. It is a love that takes on flesh and heals the sick, feeds the hungry, and releases the captives. A love that goes to the outcast and welcomes a stranger. A love that does not condemn, but does tell the truth, which is received by the wicked (and us when we are wicked) as condemnation.

God in love sees us suffering the long withering of wandering in the desert or the sharp pangs of the serpent’s tooth and comes to us to heal and feed and set free, without condemnation except to tell us the truth about ourselves. And . . . and then God calls us into the flow of that love to become the ones who give it flesh for this world. We might be a bit jealous of Moses who had some blacksmithing to do, but eventually got a magical fix for snakebite. We are called to the longer harder work of taking God’s healing, feeding, liberating love to this groaning world without a miraculous fix. What we have is hope and each other and the steady quiet presence of the Spirit of God. And with that we go together to join in God’s saving work in the world. Amen.