

## Snakes On A Stick

Numbers 21: 4-9; John 3: 14-21; Ephesians 2: 1-10

Today's reading from the book of Numbers is an exceedingly difficult text. In fact, upon first reading, I'd say it represents everything I personally find distasteful about some traditional theology. Here we have a seemingly capricious God who gets irritated with the people's complaining, and in an apparent fit of temper, sends snakes to nip at them, striking many dead, until they are bludgeoned into compliance, at which point God seems to turn on a dime and forestall the smiting. It's the kind of story that could make one embarrassed to be religious, so capricious is this God, so primitive and elementary the heavy handed moralism.

I'll admit that when I first read it as one of the scriptures for today, I was inclined to take a pass and focus on one of the other lectionary options. But as the week wore on, I found myself thinking more and more about it. Somehow, it worked at me, got under my skin as the Bible is prone to do, and wouldn't let me loose.

And slowly, I began to think of it not so much as a historic event that needed explaining, but as an ancient myth that was inviting a deeper level of engagement. I know some of you, years ago, participated in a study in this church of Joseph Campbell's "Power of Myth" series. What if the Numbers reading was one of these kinds of stories? Myth, not in the sense of "untrue", but myth in the sense of a story that carries a deeper meaning, a meaning so powerful and evocative that its basis in literal history ceases to be the point.

This is a point I've been trying to make with our confirmands as we've been looking at the question of basic, Bible interpretation. It's important for all of us to remember that the Bible is not so much a single book, but a library of 66 different books, including many different types of literature. Some of it is historical, some of it is poetry, some of it is parable and story intended to teach deeper truths, and whether or not there was a literal prodigal son, say, is not so important as the fact that we are all prodigal sons and daughters, and can count on our lovesick father to run to meet us when we decide to come home.

So I started to think of the Numbers reading for today not necessarily as a historical event, although a tribe that spent years in the desert probably DID have run-ins with snake infestation, and probably would reflect on it, just as we tend to ask "where is God in this?" when we experience national or personal tragedy...so there well may have been historical aspects to this story; but I still think it runs deeper than that. I think this story is an ancient myth whose purpose was to help them work out the darker, shadowed parts of their own souls and psyches. I think the people had become so filled with negativity, so toxic with their own tendency to complain and criticize both God and each other, that it was as if they had become snakes themselves. They had habituated the sport of nipping at each other, pecking at each other, sometimes over real issues, but often probably just because they loved that hit of righteous indignation that comes when you can expose somebody else as wrong and yourself as right, when you can zing somebody else before they zing you.

I think Moses had so "had it" with his congregation's addiction to small minded bickering, to their colossal lack of gratitude, which caused them to forget that God had freed them from slavery in Egypt, and that quail and manna were a huge improvement over having been owned, lock, stock and barrel, by the Egyptians...I think that Moses was so tired of their chronic whining and power struggling and snapping at each other, and at God, that he more or less found a way to say "You are acting like poisonous snakes and it is sucking the life out of you, bit by bit and day by day, so much so that you have become walking dead people!"

And the really terrible thing was that they were blind to the fact that they were doing it. They were so wrapped up in their toxic mindset of blaming and defending and protecting their turf, that they had ceased to be aware of the fact that they were even doing it. I'm sure they could see it in each other, we always can see it there, right? But they were completely unconscious of the fact that they were doing it themselves, sort of like how we don't think about the very air we breathe; we just breathe it, blissfully unaware...

So in the myth, the snakes became symbols of the toxic, poisonous parts of themselves, their shadow-selves, if you will.

And since snakes grab most of us at a visceral, raw level, when their own behavior was put in those terms,

they finally had to wake up, give up their denial, give up looking at the other guy, and face the truth about their own, sorry selves. Only when they faced their own shadows, in this case, their addiction to petty negativity, could they begin to get free of this way of living death. And lest they forget again, Moses provides a constant reminder. He places a great, big bronze serpent on a pole, and more or less says, "if you find yourself slipping back to your old ways, took a look at that...perhaps it can remind you that the poisonous snake is within you...and in remembering to face their own shadow is their healing.

Much later, in the book of John, the metaphor is picked up and extended. John says, "Just as Moses raised up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of Man be lifted up..." So now we have another symbol for a whole way of life being raised up for our contemplation...We can even see them standing together, the serpent on a pole and the messiah on a cross, as alternative options. You can live out of your own toxic poison, your own shadow, whatever your particular version of it may be...or you can face it in yourself, accept that its part of you, offer it to God, and live instead out of the new way of life that Christ introduced...the way of love and compassion and wholeness, the way of dying to your ego-self and coming alive to a gracious and healing way of life, a way of being that is rooted in love and gentleness, that is rooted in God, who loved the world so much that He sent the son to show us what real life is like...that whoever believes in that kind of life will not be living out of petty, daily, deadness, but will be living out of eternal life already!

And then comes the Ephesians text to sum it all up: 'You were dead through the sin (the poisonous snakes) the shadows in which you once lived. But God who is rich in mercy, who loved us even while we were still just poisonous snakes nipping at each other, made us alive through Christ...and we can be raised up with him to a whole new way of life.

The tricky thing, of course, is that it has to be decided each day all over again. Will we find the courage to face the shadows in ourselves, to quit taking everybody else's inventory and look at the toxic parts of ourselves, and then, will we offer it to God, and switch our gaze to the other pole...to Christ who offers the better way of graciousness and love?

Choose you this day whom you will serve.