

March 14, 2021 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray....

God of the here and now— We have heard the words, “For God so loved the world That he gave his only son,” time and time again. We have read them on billboards, Heard them in worship, and seen them on signs. And yet we know, there is a difference between hearing those words in passing and truly, deeply listening. We long to listen, God. We long to hear your truth. We long to know your love. Open our hearts and minds. We are listening. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the book of Numbers, chapter 21, verses 4 through 9. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

⁴ From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” ⁶ Then the Lord sent poisonous^[b] serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷ The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous^[c] serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” ⁹ So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

During my summers in college, I worked as a ranger at Montreat Conference Center. It was, hands down, the best job I ever had – because I essentially just got to spend all day, every day in the woods hiking. As rangers we would lead hikes, but we also did a bit of other stuff. We had this little building, we called it the ranger hut, and it was right near shops of the conference center. The hut had rangery things like trail maps and tools, but it also had snakes. So kids or youth or anyone, could come by the ranger hut and handle and hold the snakes.

And as they would hold the snakes, we would get this same question over and over and over again – are the snakes poisonous. And no – they were not poisonous. Very few snakes are poisonous – snakes are usually venomous. Meaning they bite you and inject their venom.

Now, the snakes we had were not venomous either (they were pretty harmless garden snakes or rat snakes) - but it became a running joke about how many times we would have to explain the difference between venomous and poisonous.

I tell you this story – because our scripture for this morning – well it’s a bit of a weird passage. It felt so distant and foreign and strange to me.

When reading it for the first time this week – all I could focus on is that scripture is wrong – the snakes here are probably venomous, not poisonous. The snakes bites (venomous) the Israelites and they die.

And I gotta say – I never thought my little random knowledge of snakes would so directly tie to a scripture passage.

It can be hard to relate to the passage, not only because of the dramatic snakes, but it’s also just a piece of a larger story.

This scripture is the last of five what they call “murmuring” stories in the book of Numbers. They all occur while the Israelites are in the wilderness on the way to the promise land. And from the beginning of this journey, the people grumbled and complained. They didn’t like the water, so the lord shows Moses how to sweeten it to make it less bitter. They complained about not having food, so the lord gave them manna, and so on and so on.

And now it culminates when they, the Israelites, speak against God and Moses. So, the Lord is rightfully fed up with it and sends snakes to bite them. The Israelites realize what they’ve done – they repent, and God saves them by having Moses turn a snake into a bronze pole. They need only look at it and be healed. They must literally face the very thing that was killing them to be healed.

Even with this context, you’re still left asking why is this passage here in the lectionary? Well, it’s here because of Christ. The lectionary gospel passage for today references it directly: John 3:14-16 “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.¹⁶ “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.”

Did you know a reference to a story about Moses and snakes in the wilderness directly precedes arguably the most quoted verse of the bible?

In linking the two – in asking what Jesus has to do with snakes in the wilderness: the answer is the cross. As Craig Cocher writes, “the cross comes before the resurrection. Sometimes suffering is the only path to redemption and often the road to healing and light runs straight through darkness and pain.”

It’s an uncomfortable reality that suffering always lingers: it’s perhaps even more uncomfortable that suffering is often the direct path to healing.

We so often skip over those 40 years in the desert straight to the promise land. But they happened. And they suffered during them.

And what we learn today is sometimes the very thing you suffer is what heals you.

Talk of vaccines have dominated our lives for many months. And by now, most of us are generally familiar with how vaccines are made. They are made from the disease themselves.

As Roger Gench explains: “Scientists have learned how to replicate bacteria and viruses, render them nonlethal and inject them back into the body as vaccines. When a vaccine is injected, our human immune system goes to work producing killer memory cells against various diseases. So, a disease can turn out to be a vaccine against disease.”

The same is true for snakes. If you get bit by a snake, the cure is another snake. The anti-venom cure originates from venom, the disease. In this way, we can think of Jesus Christ as a snake – the disease. He spread like a virus through Judea and roman society until those in power saw no other option than to kill him.

And there on the cross, Christ took on all of our diseases – those that plague us individually and systemically – he took it all on.

And as he died on the cross so too did all those diseases – their power was disrupted in death by the all-encompassing love of Christ.

We have lost much these past few months, this past year. We are the Israelites, deep in the wilderness of our 40-year trek to the promise land. All that we feel – the grief, the pain, - all that we have suffered- Christ took upon the cross and in his death became the antidote.

It can be easy to assume that the staring at the face of the bronze snake to be healed is somewhat idolatrous. But what is important to center, to realize, is that God was the one who turned the snake into bronze – and then healed.

So too, Jesus turns that which we suffer into bronze so we can face it, and then be healed.

Darkness and light, healing and suffering- they go hand in hand. We have known this for generations. Even the dual nature of the snake has permeated into our culture: Have you ever noticed that the logo for the American Medicine Association is a snake wrapped around a pole? – it's based off the Greek god of medicine who always had a snake wrapped around a staff. But just like Moses that day in the wilderness, it's a snake wrapped around a pole. A reminder of the bite and the healing – that sometimes we must suffer, go through pain, to reach the antidote.

Don't lose patience, don't lose faith. These things too shall pass as we get ready to nail Christ to the cross. Because in his death on that cross, we are reconciled – we can face the bronze snake and be healed.

And that's the grace and radical love of Christ – that in lifting up his death on the cross - in lifting up all our diseases, all that we hide, our grief our pain, just like Moses lifted up the bronze snake – God disrupts them all – we need only face them and be healed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.