

This morning, we have a very strange story about snakes and faith healing. In our reading from Exodus, we find the Israelites about forty years after their flight from Egypt, still wandering in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. And all is not well with the Israelite people. They were tired of wandering, tired being stuck in the sticks, tired of going hungry and thirsty. Forty years is a long time to be wandering, and you couldn't blame the Israelites for being impatient and complaining to Moses and to God about their plight. When the Israelites complained of thirst and hunger in the middle of the wilderness, God responded this way: "Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died."

Is it just me, or is there something strange going on here? Complain of hunger and thirst and you get bitten by poisonous serpents? OK, OK, maybe the Israelites need to be corrected and even punished, but isn't this punishment excessive? Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount asked this rhetorical question: "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?" (Matthew 7:9-10). Well, in this story, the children of God asked for bread and drink, and God gives them snakes. What's the deal with that? Seems like God's really lost it here!

"Are we there, yet? How many minutes?" That's a question parents hear often from kids on a long trip. Several hours of these relentless, impatient questions are enough to get on anyone's nerves. So imagine this question being asked by over 20,000 men, not including women and children, as the Israelites were wandering for forty years in the desert! That might try the patience of anyone, including God! But I don't think it was just the impatience of the Israelites that made God angry. I think it was the Israelites' lack of trust in God. God had freed them from slavery. While in the wilderness, God provided for their physical needs—they were still alive, weren't they? Yet, they complained and spoke out against God and Moses. They didn't trust God; they were ungrateful. God provided them with food, manna from heaven every day except on the Sabbath, but the grass is always greener on the other side of the wilderness.

Manna from heaven. It sounds so good in hymns and songs. But you know what it is? As I've mentioned before in a previous sermon, in the Hebrew, "manna" is translated, "what is it?" The Israelites not only grew tired of manna, they detested it. The word "detest" in the Hebrew is an extreme word: it means to loathe, to revile and to despise. The Israelites loathed and despised the things that God had given them to sustain them in the wilderness. The people of Israel were rejecting the LORD God as their divine Protector and Provider. This extreme rejection of God's divine gift may help explain why God responded in an equally extreme way.

"OK," God seemed to have decided, "after all that I've done for you, and you still do not trust me. You reject my protection and provision, and you want to go back to Egypt. Let's see if the Egyptian snake god Nehebkau can protect you from these wilderness snakes and provide you with the food you want."

In ancient Egypt, there was a god named Ne-heb-kau, who was depicted in the form of a snake with arms and legs. Nehebkau was a snake god in whom the Egyptians believed was one of the original primeval gods. He was a god who protected the Pharaoh and all Egyptians, both in life and in the afterlife. In life, Nehebkau was invoked by the people to protect them from and cure them of venomous bites. This Egyptian deity is sometimes shown holding containers of food in his hands, offering them to the deceased.¹

You've heard the saying, "Be careful of what you ask for, because you might just get it." On that day, God gave what the Israelites prayed for and it ended up more than what they had bargained for. After being inundated by serpents, the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us."

¹ <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/nehebkau.htm>

Three simple words: “We have sinned.” Three simple words: “I was wrong.” Three simple words: “I am sorry.” Have you noticed just how hard it is to say those three simple words? To our parents? To our children? To our spouses? To our friends? To our co-workers? To God? Yet those three simple words are the gateway to restored relationships with others and with God. Confession is to honestly admit and agree with God that we have been wrong, mistaken, yes, sinful. There can be no healing, no salvation without confession.

So Moses prayed for the people and the LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” God was mad at his people, but God was also slow to anger since the Israelites had complained against God and Moses for close to forty years! But when the Israelites confessed their sin, God was quick to show compassion and mercy. Notice, the Bible never says that God removed the snakes. God only instructed Moses to make a snake and set it on a pole, and for those who were bitten by snakes, all they had to do was to look up at the pole and they would be healed and live.

I think God could have chosen anything but the Israelites had to face their sin, in the image of a snake. I don’t believe that bronze serpent actually healed anything. It was a piece of artwork wrapped around a wooden stick. What separated it from an idol (which it was later accused of being and was destroyed) was that people saw in that snake a reminder of their sin and fears, but **beyond** that, they looked up and saw the eternal power of God’s promise. God promised that God would not hold their sins against them forever. God is good, and God’s **love** endures forever. God offered them a chance to change and to find life again, if only they would face their sin and their fears, and then to look beyond it to remember that God had promised healing and life. The snake traveled with them as a reminder of where they had been and how God redeems.

That story in Numbers remained alive in the Jewish consciousness, so that over a thousand five hundred years later, a Jewish rabbi would invoke this story to explain to Nicodemus, a teacher of the law about what true salvation meant. We all are familiar with Jesus’ words in John 3:16, but right before that in verse 14, Jesus told Nicodemus, “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.” Jesus was saying that salvation and healing comes only from God, and just as the snake on the pole was a sign of God’s healing for the Israelites, the Son of Man lifted up on the cross is now the sign of God’s healing for the world. “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. 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.”

Religion writer Phyllis Tickle once wrote: “All of us are going to be bitten—painfully bitten—in this life. Most of us learn that truth fairly quickly just from experience. But, according to the story, it is not the being bitten that we in this imperfect world can do anything about; it is only the how we respond to being bitten that we can control. When we look up, usually we are saved by that very act of faith for it is when we look down and struggle with what is tormenting us that we most often empower it by the very attention we are going to give it.”² Serpents have the power to destroy, yet to look up to the bronze serpent as a sign of God’s promise, **that** has the power to save and to heal.

We no longer look up to bronze serpents; we have someone greater: Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, who was lifted up on a cross. This morning, we are called to look at the cross and see the Son of Man lifted up, and to see behind that, the God who so loved the world. In Christ, the cross, the very vehicle of death has become the symbol of our need for salvation, the symbol of our redemption and our victory over death. The cross in and of itself does not heal and save; it is the sign pointing to the One who does, Jesus Christ the living Word of God, who hung on that cross and who overcame it, and who is now alive and resurrected. Anyone who looks upon it and has faith in Christ will receive the power of God’s promise of His forgiveness, presence, healing, and salvation. Amen.

² http://www.malankaraworld.com/library/sermons/Sermons_3rd-sunday-after-danaha-snake-Tickle.htm.