

## The Strangest Story Ever Told

Numbers 21:4-9

*A sermon given by the Reverend Casey W. FitzGerald on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 22, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### Focus Text

<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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.” <sup>6</sup>Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” <sup>9</sup>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.

This weekend, my family was blessed in welcoming some old friends into our home for a visit. In anticipation of this happy reunion, I knew I’d have to somehow, miraculously, call on the Holy Spirit to work on my sermon with me a little earlier than usual so that I could actually enjoy their visit. And so, earlier this week, when my friend Shannon sent me a text message expressing her excitement about their impending trip, I expressed my strong hope that I’d actually be done with my sermon. Jokingly, she offered to help. It dawned on me how utterly ridiculous and how very strange this text from Numbers would seem to her, both because she has never been involved in a religious community and because in this sermon writing process, the text has seemed strange and at times even ridiculous to me.

I wrote back: “Well...I think it’s going to be about snakes and healing,” both cringing and laughing as I typed. [One thing that keeps our relationship strong despite our differences in viewpoint on divinity and religion is the fact that I have never seemed too crazy to her (at least not to my knowledge). Perhaps I have even tried to normalize my views, or maybe we’ve just avoided talking about them.] I was curious how she would respond. I heard back from her just a few moments later. She wrote just this: “Just write about healing and wear snakeskin boots.” If only the pulpit didn’t hide my shoes, I might have taken her up on that tempting offer: a creative way to bypass the strangeness of the text and justify the purchase of a new pair of shoes—and what preacher couldn’t use a pair of snakeskin boots!

The truth of the matter is: this is an *odd* text.

The Israelites are complaining again, which is not so odd. They are exhausted from this very long trek through the wilderness. The Hebrew tells us that they were short of *nephesh*—which can translate literally to mean that they were short of breath, or even, short of that which makes a person a person—short of their soul and passion. After all, forty years is an incredibly long time to do *anything*. Imagine living each day somewhat unsure of where you’re going—your only hope being a promise given so long ago it is barely memorable. For those born *during* that wilderness time, who had never actually lived as slaves in Egypt, this must have been especially hard—all they knew was *this* difficult life. And those who’d been there since the beginning, well, they were getting old. Moses was getting *really* old. They all struggled to find sustenance, and most of the time it was the same old stuff. Manna from heaven was not sounding so heavenly these days. And so they began to complain again—against Moses *and* against God. “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.”

It is interesting that they first complain that there is no food, and they follow it up by admitting that, well, there is food, but that it stinks! I imagine it sounded to God like it sounded to my parents when my brothers and I were kids and would open up our refrigerator at snack time, look upon its many and varied contents and loudly proclaim in frustration: “there is NOTHING to eat!” It seems that whining, complaining and exaggerating are age-old, time honored, traditions. No matter what we have, the fact of the matter is, we always seem to feel that we could have more.

But the Israelites were facing real hardships...they were not staring into full fridges. They were staring at a barren land with nothing on the horizon that promised an end to their wandering. I'm sure many of you can relate on some level to this overwhelming sense of being lost and losing hope...of staring at the future and having no idea what will come next...especially in times such as these. Yes, we see that the Israelites are ungrateful, but it's not very hard to understand why amidst all their quite serious struggles and frustrations, they began to lose faith.

They were *not* living in the land of milk and honey. They were tired. They complained.

What happens next is fairly disturbing.

“Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.” Most commentaries gloss over this part—it seems to be par for the course in the Old Testament that God retaliates when the covenant is broken. I tend to be fairly uncomfortable with these sorts of stories, wanting to relegate the cruelty I perceive to our Old Testament God, whose snakes were soon substituted for love of New Testament God. As if they can really be separated! Perhaps it reads as such because it was written in a time when the people saw God as a true micro-manager—actively and aggressively pursuing those who worked against him. We struggle with the notion that all that happens is within the realm of God's providence. The idea that “God's plan” might involve tragedy is affront to some and a comfort to others: an affront to those of us who want to proclaim a *good* God (by our standards), a comfort to those of us who would feel utterly hopeless if these tragedies lacked any meaning. For now, it seems that it must remain a mystery. Perhaps rightfully so, as to try to explain away or dissect such a mystery would diminish the tension of the story—a tension which we seem to be called to live into as Christians. After all, one unfortunate side-effect of humanity is our inability to truly understand the bigger picture. We must live as those who, for now, only see through a glass dimly. And we must do it while keeping the faith.

The Israelites did not seem to have such ontological and theological gray areas. They firmly believing that God has sent these slithering creatures to take them down, do what is necessary—they repent and ask Moses to help restore their relationship with God. In turn, Moses prays for the people.

And here's where the story seems to get just plain batty:

The Lord says to Moses: “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses makes a bronze serpent and puts it on a pole. And from then on, whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the bronze serpent and live.

The snakes are not removed. The problem isn't just miraculously erased by God. God, who could have eliminated the snakes themselves and thereby, solve the problem entirely, chose not to do so. Instead, God provides a cure. The people will continue to get bitten, but now there will be healing.

God asks Moses to create the bronze serpent, or as one commentator calls it, the “snake-on-a-stick”—a fairly bizarre move considering that it is essentially a graven image.<sup>1</sup> Is God asking Moses to break his own commandment? Why this bronze serpent? God has Moses create an image of the very creature that has brought the Israelites pain and death. Why would God do this? In creating the fake snake, God forces the

people to look straight on at that which ails them. And, forced to face their fears, the people find not death, but life. They see not a bronze-hewn idol, but God's very own self. It seems an almost cruel way to show them mercy. It is a strange story, indeed.

But it occurs to me that there is an even stranger story.

Seemingly having tried everything to keep covenant with the people, God tried one last time. God sent his only son into the world, a vulnerable baby to young, poor, unwed parents. This baby became a boy, and then a man, who showed love, patience, forgiveness, wisdom, faith, strength and continued vulnerability. And for all of these reasons, he was hung on a cross, pierced, ridiculed and finally, he died. Alone. On a cross. And as Christians, we are supposed to look up at this gruesome death and see God's love. It is non-sensical and strange. As Craig Kocher, Associate Dean at Duke University Chapel puts it: "...whether it is Moses raising up a dead serpent or Jesus bleeding on a cross, it is an odd way for God to show God's love and mercy to his people, granting healing through pain and lifting high an image of ugliness and death to bring about new life."<sup>ii</sup>

We who are in our own wildernesses do not want to have to look up at the snake, or the cross for that matter...we want the snake removed, we want the cross taken down. We want to celebrate Easter, but please don't make us think about the horrors of Good Friday. But God is telling us that this is not the way healing works. "The simple equation endures," writes the Rev. Patrick Willson, "the cure for snakes is a snake; the cure for human life is one man's life; the cure for death is death. Nothing less will do."<sup>iii</sup> We cannot understand the new life we have in Christ, without first grappling with the gruesome truth of his death. As Christians, we cannot see God, without seeing first the devastation of Christ's crucifixion.

We cannot experience healing without first naming before God that which ails us; that which fills our hearts with anxiety; that which gives us a sense of being incomplete; that which threatens our very souls and takes our breath away. And, when we do so in the midst of worship, we begin to see beyond our own pain—lifting our eyes to God. As Patrick described to the children, God can use the worst parts of our lives to turn us back towards God.

In our tradition, when we do services of wholeness and healing, like the one that will occur after the service today, we corporately acknowledge our struggles with that which threatens to take our *nephesh*, our very spirit, away. Or, maybe, we come in prayer for the uplifting of the *nephesh* of another of God's children. Even so, we stare the snakes of our world in the eyes and proclaim God's promise for ourselves. Our eyes are directed toward the cross, and in doing so, beyond it.

We can breathe again.

In effect, we are *all* in the wilderness. The snakes are closing in on us. At one point or another, if it hasn't happened already, we are gonna get bitten. And then we'll have a choice: look at the snake or don't; choose life or don't. Even as we journey toward the cross this Lenten season, as strange as it seems, we sense—we trust—that in the death of Christ, God chose life. Shouldn't we do the same?

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<sup>i</sup> Willson, Patrick J., "Snake on a Stick," *Christian Century*, March 3, 1994.

<sup>ii</sup> Kocher, Craig, *Feasting on the Word (Year B, Vol. 2)*, p. 100.

<sup>iii</sup> Willson, Patrick J., "Snake on a Stick," *Christian Century*, March 3, 1994.