

3.14.2021
Lent 3 B
AJH+

*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,*

I don't like snakes.

You can remind me that they are a part of God's good creation, point out the good that they do in our ecosystem, or reassure me that they will not strike unless provoked – they still terrify me.

Earlier this week, I saw on social media one of those warnings, complete with pictures, about the beginning of the season when we may start to see snakes appear and to be vigilant in places where they might be residing. I haven't slept since.

So then, today's readings from holy scripture, filled with fiery, poisonous snakes that came among God's people in the wilderness, biting and killing them, one by one, and echoes of serpents lifted up on poles, are enough to make me more than a little jittery. But as is so often the case with the stories of scripture, there is more to it.

In the passage we heard read from the Book of Numbers, the great multitudes of the Hebrew people, long sojourning in the wilderness, have grown weary from their travels. They are beginning to wonder if they might have been better off had they never followed Moses, never left the land of Egypt, never broken the bonds of slavery in search of new life in a new and distant land.

God has given them food, but they no longer care for the food provided from on high, bread from heaven, the manna that greeted them at each new day's dawn. They detest God's provision for them; indeed, another translation of this text renders the people crying out, "...we have come to loathe this miserable food." God's chosen ones have become impatient and they are done with this trek that seems to know no end.

In a rather peculiar response, God offers not an immediate solution, but the introduction of another peril, poisonous serpents. It is exactly as it sounds. Some translations describe the serpents as fiery, illustrative of the nature of their bite which packs a dangerous and painful punch for the recipient.

God's response to the Israelites' groaning leaves us scratching our heads, doesn't it? What are we to make of this God, the One who sends serpents among his own people? How does this reconcile with the God who, in the beginning, called order out of chaos and then called it good?

Perhaps there are no easy answers found within this passage. And maybe that is the point.

God sent calamity upon his own beloved people and this same God who sends the fiery, poisonous serpents among the people filled with despair does not immediately remove the stinging pain from among them. Instead, God offers a remedy.

Through Moses, the great prophet, the one that the Israelites bid to plead their case before God, an antidote is offered. Moses is instructed to create a serpent, made of bronze, and to set it upon a pole, high and lifted

up; when someone is bitten by one of the poisonous creatures, if they look upon the bronze serpent, that person shall live.

If it seems strange to you, let's be clear, it's not just you. Yes, we did read from the Book of Exodus just a week ago, "You shall not make for yourself an idol...You shall not bow down to them or worship them..." And, yet, that is exactly how this sounds.

But the ancient rabbis had a different understanding of this action. They believed that, in looking upon the serpent Moses created upon the instruction of Almighty God, one was actually looking upon the very face of God. God used the image of that which was inflicting so much pain, so much harm, to, in turn, create a path of healing and health. That which was the cause of death, through the mystery of God, becomes the means of life.

Fast forward several generations and Jesus picks up on this theme in his conversation with the man named Nicodemus in the third chapter of John. Nicodemus was a leader among the Jews and has come to Jesus in secret, under the cover of darkness, to press him with questions. The two have been talking about how one can be born again, a second time, when Jesus points toward that which is unseen, beyond the human mind's ability to fathom and comprehend, the mystery of God.

"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up..."

In simple, but profound, words, Jesus identifies himself with the serpent God instructed Moses to create and set upon a pole, high and lifted up. In time, we know that Jesus himself will be set upon a pole, that of the hard wood of a cross, and lifted up for all to see.

In so doing, that barbarous image and brutal means of state-sponsored execution is transformed into a new icon and means of life. But it goes even a step further. The substance of that which caused so much inflicts so much pain, so much harm, in turn becomes that which opens the way to health and life.

In Jesus, God enters into the reality of the human experience as a human person, the Christ, whose body was beaten and bruised, to show us, a wounded and hurting people, the way to new life. And the life to which Jesus points the way is a life not sullied by the sting and bite of our broken humanity, but redeemed and set free for the sake of the world.

Like the rabbis of old who invited the understanding that looking upon the serpent was to look upon the face of Almighty God, we followers of Jesus are invited to know that looking into the eyes of crucified One is to look into the eyes of God, to glimpse and know the very heart of God. The eyes of God see the pain and fear in which we live, and God's heart ever moves toward a love of mercy and redemption.

Dear friends, as we walk the second half of this Lenten path, ever toward resurrection joy, let us look around and discover anew the images of our redemption. The cross upon which we gaze is not just a symbol of death. That which was the cause of death, through the mystery of God, has become the means of life, our life. More than we can comprehend, it is life itself.

Gaze upon the cross, and live.

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.
Because, by your Holy Cross, you have redeemed the world.