

Lent 4—Year B
Numbers 21:4-9
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

Okay, we've just got a weird passage from **Numbers** this morning. **The Israelites are going around the land of Edom; but the people become impatient on the way.** And when we become **impatient**, what do we do? (*pause*) We *whine*; we *complain*; we *blame*. **“God, 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 loathe this contemptible, worthless food.”** That would be the *manna* God has provided as total gift that they would be *detesting*.

How *annoying* to God—**“I give them everything they need to thrive, and all they do is *whine*, those ungrateful, entitled people of mine.”**

So, **God**, being appropriately mature as the *Creator of all that is*, **sends poisonous serpents—fiery serpents**, to be more specific, because the **poison** gave a *burning sensation like fire*—**God sends fiery, poisonous serpents among the people, who bite the people, so that many Israelites die.**

Like I said, it's weird.

The people then come to Moses and say, “We have sinned, we have missed the mark by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.”

So, Moses prays for the people.

And the Lord says to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.”

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.

Okay, let's hit the pause button. *Do we really believe that God purposely sends poisonous snakes to kill us when we complain and speak against God?* That doesn't square with the **“God who so loves the world”** that we hear about in **John 3** today.

So, there are a couple of *interpretative* ways to go with this. **One**, we're seeing *the evolution of God*—just like we saw **after the flood** when *God promises never again to wreak that kind of havoc on creation*. **Two**, we're seeing *the evolution of religion that is maturing in how it understands God*—moving *from* a *God who seeks retribution and vengeful revenge* *to* a *God who desires that we live and thrive*. **Three**, this is *recounting the terror of moving through the wilderness where poisonous snakes are killing people left and right and the people are trying to make sense of why such tragedy should be visited upon them after all they've been through*. This is the *Job* experience, *“Why me? What did I do wrong?”*—and if you've ever gone through a season where things just keep going wrong, well, you get it.

But just for today, let's suspend our need to resolve why God would send fiery serpents to kill God's people and simply enter this story and see what emerges.

When I am in the **wilderness**, and I am being given some **provision** for walking through that **wilderness**—*metaphorical manna*, so to speak—and I **fail to see all that is there supporting me**, and **what I do see, I call contemptible and worthless**, then it is highly likely that **I will be bit by the fiery serpent of despair**. My *capacity to trust*, my *capacity to hope*, my *capacity to see all that is sustaining me*, that *capacity dies*, and **it gets very dark**, indeed.

And in that **darkness**, one is prone to *complain* and *blame*, but that only takes **us deeper into the darkness**. At some point, all this *despair*, all the *blame*, all the *complaint*, it's **death**. We're *missing the mark* and moving farther away from where we're longing to go. Admitting that we're way over here, when we long to be here, well, that's the first step. The 12 step programs put it this way—*"We admitted we were powerless and our lives had become unmanageable."*

We all get bit by the **fiery serpent**, brought face-to-face with all the ways we *miss the mark*, all the ways we **lose our way** in the **wilderness**, all the ways we **try to control the uncontrollable** with **disastrous, even deadly, consequences**.

But God's remedy is so intriguing. God tells Moses to take the very thing that's killing them and to set it on a pole, and then, when someone gets bit, they should look at it and live. The bronze serpent on the pole.

So, **God longs for us to live and be whole**, *but that doesn't mean that we're not going to get bit by these things that burn us and poison us*—be they **despair** or **cynicism** or **hopelessness** or **certitude** or **hardness of heart** or **heartbreak** or **grief** or **loss** or **blame** and **complaint** or the **changes and chances of life** that are way beyond our control.

No, these things are still going to bite us.

But instead of *pretending they're not there* or *diminishing their impact upon us*, **God says, "Nope, you've been bitten. Look on what's bitten you. Look into it because within that very thing that's bitten you is the way to life."** The things that reach up and **bite us** in life—we can find our way back to wholeness and life, not by **avoiding them**, but by **moving into them and discovering whatever is there to be discovered**, all the while **clinging to God's desire for our fullness and wholeness of life**.

Jesus picks this notion up in **John 3** and takes it even deeper.

Jesus said, **"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever trusts in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who trusts 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."**

Jesus is super clear here—**God loves the world**, **God didn't send Jesus to condemn the world, but in order that the world might find wholeness**. Jesus is that **fiery serpent** upon whom we need to look, upon whom we need to gaze, and in some sense, **by whom we need to be bit**—so that all that is **not** of wholeness and life can die away—*so that we can move into greater wholeness, deeper life*.

You *don't* get to discover resurrection life if you *can't get bit* and *die* to those things that are **not** the fullness of life that God desires for us. No matter how far we have *missed the mark* and *lost our*

way, *Jesus is emphatic*—it's all going to be held in his loving arms stretched out on the cross. All the ways we are dreaming up of *killing each other, in every way possible*—Jesus' nonviolent love is going to swallow that up and *make us whole, if we will just look at him long enough to let his nonviolent love seep into our souls, let his fire ignite our spirits, let his heart quicken our hearts which have lost their capacity to believe and trust and hope.*

Jesus goes on in **John 3** to speak of **judgment**, and this is what he says, “**And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light.**”

The light has come into the world; it's there; it's been there, and it will be there, and **people still love the darkness rather than the light.** When you've been **bit by the fiery serpent**, when you are **lost in the darkness**, it *takes courage to gaze upon the very thing that bit you, the very thing that brought down that curtain of darkness; it takes courage to look there, and trust that there is light, even there.*

Maybe we *miss the light* because we're looking for the Hollywood sweeping spotlights; we sure don't expect to *find the light radiating from a cross*, but that's where **God has chosen to place the beacon that will call us back to life. It begins with trusting that we are never ever alone, not even in our most profound times of darkness and suffering and even death. God hangs with us, literally, arms outstretched gathering us in to the Divine Embrace that won't ever let us go.**

You **look on that fiery serpent** long enough, and *it will change you forever.*

It's still pretty weird, but it does ring true—you're going to get **bit by the serpent**, and **something in you will die**, *but when you do, keep your eyes fixed on the One lifted up whose arms are outstretched, let his fire light your way and kindle your heart.*

God sent him because God loves us and this whole broken wonderful magnificent world, even with all its fiery serpents.

And when you **look on the One lifted up**, *remember the lengths that God will go to show us the depth of Love that makes us whole. Trust that love to see you through whatever darkness you're in until the dawn breaks, and the stone is rolled away, and you can see for yourself what wounds look like in resurrection light.* Amen.

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