

Lent 4 /B

*The Venom of Fear*

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

14 March 2021



If, like me, you suffer from ophidophobia, this is certainly not the Sunday for you. Ophidophobia is the fancy word for fear of snakes. Not just a healthy fear of snakes, which can save you from being bitten by a venomous one, but fear of all snakes – fear that rises to the point of a deep-seated phobia. That’s me. My children knew that a trip to the zoo would never include a step inside the herpetorium, or snake house. And yet, here this morning, I am faced with not one but two passages of scripture that deal with snakes. (*Shudder!*)

There is no more familiar passage in all of Scripture than John 3:16. It has been emblazoned on billboards and bumper stickers, referenced in country songs, sewn into throw pillows and baseball caps, and more than a few tattoos.

And yet, for as familiar as the sixteenth verse of John’s third chapter is, it is juxtaposed against the verses immediately preceding it, which are undoubtedly some of the most unfamiliar verses in all of the New Testament. Here, Jesus makes reference to the tale of Moses lifting up a bronze snake in the desert wilderness, which hearkens back to one of the most bizarre stories in the Exodus saga.

The story to which Jesus is referring is found in the Book of Numbers, our first reading this morning. Here, we encounter the Hebrew people, having long been liberated from the Egyptians, but still, all these years later, still wandering in the wilderness, searching for the land of milk and honey which has been promised them by God. The longer they wander, the crankier and more difficult they become. So, looking for someone to blame, they take aim at God and Moses alike, crying out in petulant frustration.

All told, Numbers depicts five of these so-called “murmuring episodes,” wherein the former slaves grumble and complain to Moses about an assortment of perceived grievances. They don’t like the food; they want more water; they’re tired; they want to go back to Egypt; they’re sick of camping. Picture a minivan loaded up for a road trip with a gaggle of disgruntled toddlers kicking the seats, throwing popcorn, and screaming, “Are we there yet?” and you won’t be far off!

Each episode follows a predictable pattern: the Hebrew people complain; God gets angry; the Hebrew people realize they’ve made God mad and beg Moses to intercede on their behalf; Moses does; and God calms down. Then, a few chapters later, another tantrum erupts, and the same pattern unfolds. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Finally, their sniping reaches a boiling point: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness,” they grumble against God and Moses, “For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”

Did you catch that? If you listen carefully, you’ll catch the level of absurdity underpinning their whining. “There is no food and water,” they moan in one breath; and then, “we detest this miserable food,” they complain in the next. In response to their incessant complaint, God punishes them for their insolence and sedition by sending venomous snakes into the encampment.

Now, at this point, some of us may be thinking: “Well that seems a bit harsh, God. What happened to your infinite compassion? Those snakes you sent bit your chosen people, and some folks even died!” But we must leaven our reading of Scripture with a bit of theological imagination.

The wandering Hebrews were faced with a choice. On the one hand was a life-giving relationship with the God who had saved them – a relationship that challenged everything they thought they knew about the way the world worked, a relationship that pushed them to greater depths of trust and obedience. It was a leap of faith. On the other hand was the oppression of slavery in Egypt which would surely lead only to death, but at least it offered some semblance of consistency and predictability along the way.

Over and over again, the people voice their desire to go back to Egypt and pick up where they left off as slaves to Pharaoh. In one scene, they actually hatch a plan of sedition: “Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt” (*Num. 14:4b*). At least in Egypt, they reasoned, they knew how the system worked. With God, there was no telling where they would be led, how long they might be forced to wander, or what they would be asked to do. So enough with all this “chosen people” stuff, we’ll take our mundane life of slavery back, thank you very much!

And yet, the narrative arc of the Old Testament in particular, and indeed all of Scripture in general, is one of a relentless and undeterred God doing whatever it takes to maintain a relationship with a rebellious humankind.

Even here, as the Hebrews are hell-bent on marching back to certain death in Egypt because they feared what they did not know and couldn’t predict, God is ultimately and inexorably the source of life. So, as the people once again come to their senses, repent, and turn away from their foolish and seditious ways, God hears their prayer and once again – as God always does - sets before them a wellspring of life and healing and restored wholeness

But the way God chooses to do it is what makes this passage so strange: God tells Moses to craft the image of a venomous snake and raise it on a pole in the center of the camp, so that any of those who were bitten could simply look at it and be healed. Moses does as he is told, and crafts a venomous snake from bronze, puts it on a pole, and sets it in the midst of the people. Then, miraculously, just as God had promised, whenever a snake bit someone, they had only to look at the bronze snake and they would be saved from death.

In fact, the statue worked so well that it became a kind of cultural icon among the Israelites. The statue was passed down from one generation to the next until, centuries later, it winds up in the Temple in Jerusalem. By then, it had acquired both a name (*Nehushtan*) and a cult-like following, which prompts King Hezekiah to eventually have it destroyed. (*2 Kings 18:4*)

Although there is little chance that this unfamiliar and bizarre tale will make it into this summer’s Vacation Bible School curriculum, at its heart is a universal truth: there is no venom quite so deadly as fear.

Fear of the unknown - fear of the other - fear of failure - fear of death - nothing causes spiritual and emotional paralysis more effectively than fear.

It corrodes faith, cuts off our pathways for giving and receiving grace and mercy, and if left untreated long enough, it gives way to hatred, recalcitrance, hardness of heart and soul, and leads ultimately to death.

As Moses and the Hebrews journeyed through the desert wilderness for forty long years, and even once they entered into the Promised Land, the lesson was still clear: only when they acknowledged their deepest fears, only when they confronted their deepest fears, only when they brought that which they feared most into full view, were they made whole. May the lesson of this obscure tale be clear for us this morning: as we continue on our Lenten journey in the weeks ahead, there may be no more important time for us to take account of the ways in which each of us are afflicted by the venom of fear.

As was true for our spiritual ancestors, the same is true for us. When we come into full view of the cross and are faced with the fearful reality of our own eventual and inevitable death, it is only by facing that fear and walking headlong into death's dark shadow that we will come to know the fullness of Christ's resurrected life.

For indeed, God so loves the world – so loves each of us – that he gave his only-begotten Son, so that all who believe in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.

And that is definitely something we need not fear.  
Amen.