

“Snakes on a Plain” Numbers 21:4-9 & John 3:14-21 Rev. Steve Clifton
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Growing up, my father kept a First Aid Kit in the car trunk and along with bandages and disinfectant it contained a snake bite kit. My father worked in power generation and systems engineering for Ontario Hydro and sometimes his work would take him to the Bruce Peninsula, the region that is home to Ontario's one species of poisonous snake - The Massassauga Rattler.

When we travelled as a family to Ontario's snake country, my 10 to 12 year old self always hoped to see a Massassauga rattler. We saw snake skins that the rattlers shed. A friend had a discarded snake rattle that when shaken still made a sound. But Massassauga rattlers are reclusive and shy. So, much to my disappointment I never saw one in the wild. As an adult I know that's a good thing and its good too that we never had to use our family snake bite kit.

If 10 year old me had been on the plains of Mt Hor, in the Edomite desert, with the People of Israel long ago I would have seen lots of snakes. And would have needed that snake bite kit too.

We read today from the Book of Numbers. It's a book that comes up in the lectionary rarely and so it is read in from church at most once a year. It has some strange tales, like the one about a talking donkey, and it has today's reading about snakes... but mainly it's the story of Moses leading God's people through the wilderness, from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land.

The Israelites have been wandering in the wilderness for almost 40 years. And it is becoming painfully clear that the wandering is, in fact, their own fault. God has led them to the Promised Land and told them to enter. But with the exception for two brave spies who ventured across the Jordan River, the people refuse to believe that the hoped for land is safe. They cannot trust that the God who has delivered them from slavery can now be trusted to lead them into a land that they believe is occupied by "giants." And so, through their own inability to trust God, they are doomed to wander instead. As they wander, the Israelites complain "We don't have anything to eat!...But what we do have to eat, we hate!"

And the Israelites not only blame Moses, they also blame God, the One who delivered them from enslavement and who provides Scripture elsewhere calls "angelic bread". God provided manna, bread in the wilderness.

So, as the rabbis interpret the story, God decides that since his people do not appreciate the care and protection they have been given as they choose to wander in dangerous places, the care and protection will be taken away.

And the vipers and snakes that have been in the desert with them all along now begin to bite the Israelites and kill them. The people don't know what to do. So, they turn to Moses. And Moses in turn prays to God.

And now this strange tale gets stranger. God tells “Make a metal serpent,” and “Put it on a pole and lift it up where all the people can see it. Tell the people that if they look at the metal serpent then the snake-bites they suffer won’t kill them.”

So you have to wonder. Couldn’t God could have just as easily have taken away the snakes altogether? St Patrick, legend has it, chased the snakes from Ireland, couldn’t Moses do the same here?

Or couldn’t God just put the safety controls back on? But instead, God asks the people to try to trust God once again. If they do what God says, the snake bites will not be deadly.

So what are we to do with this strange story?

First, its strangeness is instructive. Some Biblical texts are difficult to interpret or apply. In the Rabbinic tradition, centuries of discussion and interpretation are written down into a book called the Talmud. In this tradition, stories like ours today are not reduced to a pithy slogan, but are ruminated on generation by generation. So sometimes it’s just helpful to remember that the stories of our tradition have a depth to be explored.

Secondly, the God of this story is a bit cranky. People complain and lack trust and so snakes are unleashed on the grumbling masses. Where is the God with whom we feel safe and comfortable?

The Hebrews who wandered through the wilderness did not experience God as a safe and comfortable companion. In order to set God’s people free God sends ten vicious plagues on their Egyptian slaveholders. On the way out of Egypt, God appears as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, a sight that incites panic in the Egyptians. Then at Sinai, God thunders on the mountain in fire and smoke, terrifying the Israelites. The God of Numbers is more awesome than safe.

As 21st-century Christians it may take us out of our comfort zones to envision God as a dangerous, unpredictable presence in our lives. To see the mystery and divine freedom of the God revealed in Scripture can be unsettling. But it’s good to remember that a domesticated, unmoving God does not pull a people out of slavery, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land; In a world sometimes longing for change, for justice...maybe it’s good to remember an awesome, unpredictable and yet ever faithful God.

And then there is the idea of lifting up a symbol to offer healing. In this strange story, God instructs Moses to make an image of a snake in bronze and to put it on a pole in the midst of the people. Looking on the image will bring healing.

Could it be that looking at what causes harm brings us to healing? If we look at our brokenness, our failings and really see them, can that be the road to liberation? If we face our prejudices, our weaknesses, our failures, collective and individual, is that the way to move beyond them into a place of healing and hope? Confession leads to reconciliation. Acknowledging harm done leads to healing.

On this PIE Sunday where we consider the importance of being Public, Intentional and Explicit in our support and inclusion of all people including the LGBTQ2+ community, we can reflect on the importance of symbols that Elizabeth shared with us...symbols may be deliberate, concrete signs of acceptance, of belonging, that might offer a message of healing to someone who has been marginalized, or excluded. Visible symbols are important and potent.

In the early centuries of the Jesus movement, when Jesus followers were a persecuted minority, cryptic symbols were used to communicate the faith, a kind of artistic code shared the faith and when Jesus was depicted in hidden places like catacombs, it was the image of the Good Shepherd that was most common, that offered inspiration and courage to those who looked up and saw them.

Then beginning in 321CE, when the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the faith of Empire, Jesus was elevated and in the new cathedrals, Jesus became Christ the heavenly Emperor, reigning over all things, of all...

But then in the 9th Century, in the churches of what is now Germany, first in the Cathedral of Cologne a new image of Christ began to appear in churches: the crucifix, the image of Christ crucified on the cross, beaten, bloated and broken... And people were shocked - astounded by this innovative image of the suffering Christ. In their sanctuaries they could look up and see Jesus as the One who is suffering and dying with the common people; in a time of uncertainty and great social change, of plague and tumult, as the first millennium moved into the second, the cross of Jesus became the symbol to look up to when God's people gathered.

John's gospel shared today takes the snake on a pole symbol and offers the symbol of Christ on the cross as a healing symbol. In life, in hardship as in joy, Jesus is with us. In all of life, even in times of struggle and shadow, God in Christ is with us, even to a cross.

There may be snakes or other challenging things around us, but we can look up to Jesus and know that in all of life God is faithful, God is there. Look up to Jesus and be healed. Amen.