

Numbers 21:4-9
John 3:14-21
Creekside COB
March 22, 2009

“Snake Bit”

Missionaries are a great source of stories. My friend Dan grew up in Nigeria where his parents were Church of the Brethren missionaries. He tells the story of what happened when his father woke in the middle of the night to heed nature’s call. Half asleep, he walked outside to use the facilities, which was just a big bucket. He no sooner sat on it than something wet hit his rump. Then he felt it again. He got up slowly, reached for the flashlight and shined it into the bucket. Coiled inside was a spitting cobra. He thanked the cobra for the warning, and went back to bed where he laid awake the rest of the night contemplating how his obituary might have reported his cause of death.

Snakes are fascinating creatures. I’ve handled a few over the years. They don’t frighten me, but I’ll admit that I don’t like stumbling upon them by surprise. While fishing one day, my lure caught in a cluster thick willow branches hanging over the water. I brought the boat in close, grabbed a handful of branches and pulled them toward me. As I freed the hooks I didn’t realized I had pulled a big, balled-up black snake within a foot of my face. It doesn’t take much to startle me, and I was out of that willow in a flash.

Many people are scared silly of snakes. Those who are paralyzed by fear of snakes have what is called, *herpophobia*. A large segment of the public, list snakes as their greatest fear. If you asked them, “*Which hand should you use to pick up a snake?*” they would answer, “Someone else’s.” It doesn’t matter that the snake is harmless. In their eyes, a snake is a snake is a snake, and there is no such creature as a good snake.

I hope none of you are so fearful of snakes that you will freak out over a sermon about these tubular reptiles. There is an obscure passage in the book of Numbers that would get little attention had Jesus not mentioned it in the third chapter of John. Moses and the children of Israel spent years wandering in the bleak and barren wilderness, somewhere between Egypt and the Promised Land.

Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom to ask permission to travel through his territory. They told the king what a tough time they had been through, and would he be so kind to let them take a shortcut through his land. “If you let us enter, we promise not to tromp through your fields or vineyards. We won’t drink your water. We won’t let one toe go off the King’s Highway to the left or right.” Permission was denied, so Israel had to go the long way around Edom.

Most of the first generation that had escaped slavery in Egypt had died. A new generation of wanderers knew nothing about Egypt except for what their parents had told them. The first generation complained about the conditions they endured. The next generation was even more impatient.

I know close families that have returned from camping trips not speaking to each other. The tension of living in close quarters for twenty-four hour stretches puts people on edge. Words are exchanged. Molehills turn into mountains. They can’t wait to get home and shut themselves in their rooms. Imagine a forty-year camping trip. Forty years of hot days and cold nights. Forty years of thirst and hunger. Forty years of eating flakey, tasteless manna and occasional quail. No wonder death in Egypt seemed preferable over their present circumstances.

They complained to Moses. “*What were you thinking? Why did you drag us into this godforsaken place with no water or decent food? They complained to God, “We can’t stomach this stuff anymore!”* So God decided, “That’s it. I’ve had enough of their belly-aching.” And how did the Lord who is “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” respond? God sent swarms of

poisonous snakes into their camp. Israelites dropped dead by the score.

No one left a door open at Reptile Gardens. Israel didn't camp in the path of a snake migration. The snakes weren't a nasty surprise from Pharaoh. They were God's snakes.

The Hebrew word for fiery serpents is *Seraph*. In the sixth chapter of Isaiah, the prophet tries to describe his vision of the Lord, "high and lifted up." Around God were fiery, frightening creatures called the *Seraphim*. Their presence signifies that God is an awesome, mysterious, fearful presence. God is not warm and cuddly. God is not a benevolent grandfather. Fire is not a plaything, and neither is God.

When you are sick in bed, you have time to think. "I'm not going to take my health for granted any more." Illness makes you appreciate how good it is to feel good. You understand a little more about the necessity of gratitude. Every time a snake sank its burning fangs an ankle of an Israelite, people reconsidered their response. The food wasn't great, but it was still food, and it kept them alive, and being alive is better than being dead. The snakebites made them remember the gifts God had given them. Israel changed its tune and pleaded to Moses and God, "Forgive our griping and groaning. We don't know what we were talking about. No more snakes! Please!"

Moses prayed, and God answered, but not how you might expect. No one from Reptile Gardens showed up with snake poles and gunnysacks. God didn't send the reptiles slithering away. They didn't go anywhere, and they kept biting. God told Moses to make a metal snake and put it on a flagpole. "Tell the people who are bitten to look up to the metal snake and they will not die." Every time they were bitten, every time they felt threatened they were told to "look up and live."

Imagine you are driving in the mountains. Your car is on the outside lane of a narrow, steep, and winding road. A little beyond the shoulder, a sheer precipice drops, who knows how far. A guy in the passenger's seat is deathly afraid of heights. He

is coming unraveled and you're trying try to help the poor man. You say, "Whatever you do, ***DON'T LOOK DOWN.***"

"Don't look down," Moses said. "Keep your eyes on the bronze serpent and you will live." He told them to look at a likeness of what they feared most. "Whom did the snakes belong to?" Someone observed -- "the snakes are God's," (Barbara Brown Taylor). Big ones, tiny ones -- long ones, short ones -- fat ones, skinny ones -- colorful ones, drab ones -- harmless ones, lethal ones -- snakes that bite, snakes that squeeze -- snakes in the grass, a snake on a pole -- all of them are God's.

God put us in a world where the things that scare us and hurt us, also heal us. Do you know what is injected into people bitten by poisonous snakes? Serum made from snake venom. That which hurts can also heal.

My father could not bring himself to use the railroad crossing where my sister was killed. I understand why. It took a while before I could do it. Dad never did. Even if it meant going far out of his way to get somewhere, he would not go on Barks Road. Looking back, I should have put him in the car and not told him where we were going. Before he could say no, I would drive over that crossing. I might have done it three or four times. I would say, "Look, Dad, I know it hurts you terribly. It always will. You won't get over Ann's death, but if you'll stop avoiding it, and look up instead, it will get better. God will get you through it." At the time I was too young to know better. But I've done it several times in my imagination.

It is a strange and mysterious world we live in where God uses pleasure *and* pain to mold and mature us. Good and evil, punishment and promise, blessing and curse. In God's economy it is all mixed together and poured out as a means to save us. Whether it is snakes or bears or ominous things in the dark unknown, God can use their bite to bless.

To be grasped by this text we must pair it with another. I will give you two numbers, you would know what I'm talking about-- 3:16. "*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...*" We

don't spend much time reading what comes before John 3:16. Under the cover of night, Nicodemus creeps through the darkness to see Jesus. He wants a straight answer about eternal life, but the conversation leaves him with more questions than answers. Nicodemus was a learned man, but couldn't grasp what Jesus said. He couldn't identify the feeling he had in Jesus' presence. He wasn't sure if he was dying or being born.

"You must be born from above," Jesus told Nicodemus. Look up, not down. Look up and see what God is doing. Don't look down to what you already know. *"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up,"* Jesus said. (John 3:14)

Jesus scared us silly because we didn't understand. The only way to rid ourselves of fear, we thought, was to kill the source. We nailed him down and lifted him up, washed our hands and said, "That takes care of that!" But, as Will Willimon says, we were in for a surprise. "In lifting him up from earth toward heaven, his poisonous, prophetic words of venom became the anti-venom, the means of salvation."

Snake bit people looked up to Moses' bronze serpent and didn't die. Sin bit people looked up at the man who scared them. They nailed him to an instrument of death that became a cure for death. Those who looked hard at the man on the pole and saw more than defeat... "Surely this man is the Son of God," they said.

My message began in Nigeria. Now let's go back. On the mission field, teaching is mutual. Ministry in another culture requires learning the people, their customs, and way of thinking. The Petry's learned that Nigerians have many parables that express truths about life. One popular parable offers wise insight in an earthy way. The Nigerians say, *"Life is like the chicken's butt. Sometimes you get crap. Sometimes you get eggs."*

Most of the time we can't tell things apart. We think we know what we're looking at, and discover we are mistaken. We project our wants and wishes on to God, wanting him to be a heavenly

Affirmer who never complicates our lives, never asks for more than we want to give, never denies us dessert, and blesses us regardless the path we choose. The truth is, God's word is also threatening. It compels us to choose the hard way, calls us to make sacrifices, and sometimes delivers a fiery bite. But the truth is also this -- the bite can make us better. That which hurts also heals. What feels like death can lead to life.