

Series: In the Wilderness

Sermon: Snakes, Why Did it Have To Be Snakes?

Numbers 21:4-9

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; 5 they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

6 Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 7 The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

8 The Lord said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." 9 So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

John 3:14-16 (NIV)

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

Sermon

Years ago I heard about an erring church member out in West Texas who had rebuffed every effort of the local church to restore him to faithfulness. One day he was bit-ten by a huge rattlesnake, and being on the verge of death, he called the local preacher to come to his bedside. Re-questing prayer, the preacher recounted before God how all of their efforts to restore this erring Christian had failed until his encounter with the rattlesnake. Allowing as how this erring brother had been brought to repentance by his snakebite, and allowing as how his whole family was unfaithful, the preacher prayed, "Lord, send us more rattlesnakes to bite this man's wife, and his boys, and his girls. . .

From time to time when I was growing up, I would hear some of the older folk speak of someone as being "snake bit." I knew they was not talking about an actual encounter with a rattlesnake. They was talking about the way someone encountered life. Folks who were "snake bit" were folks whose past choices had placed them in bad situations, where they made more bad choices which placed them in more bad situations. A vicious cycle, if you will, of bad choices.

The origin of using the phrase "snake bit" to describe those people for whom the ball of life never seems to take the right bounce, is in the story we read today from the Book of Numbers. This morning I want to talk about that story as a way to understand how God's grace works in our lives.

Our Scripture for today takes place after God had freed the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. This August, we are looking at some of the wilderness stories of Moses and the people of Israel. Going from the slavery of Egypt to the freedom found in the promised land. For quite some time God had been leading them through the

wilderness and providing what they needed. And from time after time the people had complained and tested the patience of God.

The story for today begins with the people complaining once again. Although God had given them freedom and was leading them to the Promised Land and providing food for them to eat, the Israelites spoke out against God and Moses.

How like us (or at least, how like I am). Regardless of the blessings in our yesterdays, we want more and better for today. We complain about our lives, and we overstate our complaint just as the Israelites did when first they complained they had no food and water and then said they detested their miserable food. God gave them manna, and later, we hear them complaining, I don't want anymore stinking manna. I remember as a teenager standing in front of the open refrigerator door, looking at all sorts of food, complaining to my mother: "There's nothing in here to eat." Or I hear myself as an adult, after having received many gifts of grace and because of those gifts have had many joys and accomplishments, complaining when problems or defeats come: "Nothing ever goes right.". I remember the last time we bought a car, Stephanie was out test driving, I was stuck to chitchat with the car salesman. He related a story of something that happened that week. A dad bought his 16 year old daughter a brand new car. Brand new. A fun, red sporty looking car. She would be the envy of other Sophmores. But at the end of the week, he brought it back. She didn't like it, it was the wrong kind of red. Get a different one. She had received a \$25,000 gift, and yet she felt like she got wronged. But then I look at my life, at my blessings, and I might say, "Yes, but my life is still not perfect."

We humans tend to take blessings for granted, accept them, enjoy them, and then forget them. What we tend to focus on and dwell on are those things that do not turn out the way we want or those situations that cause us pain. All too often we not only forget our blessings, we speak and act as if we had never been blessed. Our attitude and thoughts imply (if not clearly declare) God really does not care what happens to us.

When the people in the story complained once again, God lost patience with the Israelites and sent poisonous serpents among them. Many Israelites died of snake bite. According to the story teller, the reason the people were snake bit is because they lost their focus on God and God's grace. They were snake bit because the way they dealt with their hardship was with self-pity, resentment and anger. They lived without any awareness of their debt to God, and as a result they lived without any sense of gratitude or the joy that comes with gratitude. When this is the way we live, we stop living. Something in our soul dies, and rather than being a positive force in life, we become a negative force; and the more negative we are, the more our living seems to be snake bit. Notice in this story, the serpents are not presented as something evil. The serpents are instruments of God's tough love. I hope God never gives his tough love to me! The serpents are the instruments of God's grace that comes in the form of judgment. When we fail to live as God intends, there are consequences that sooner or later have to be dealt with

This is not only true of us as individuals, it is also true of us as a society, and as an international community. For example, as a nation we engaged in slavery, and today we are still dealing with the consequences. Or, if we look at the terrible and terrifying problems in the Middle East, we see that this story from the Book of Numbers is a description of our current mess. We are living with the consequences of decade after decade and even century after century of nations and societies failing to live together as God intends. And now we find ourselves in some sort of snake pit and snake bit situation.

In the story we read today, the Israelites went running to Moses saying: "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord to take away the serpents." Translation. "Moses, we were stupid! Help us out of our stupidity!"

And this is what we often do. The pain and problems that confront us make us aware of our need for God and

for God's grace. In the midst of this snake pit, that is the result of what we as persons or we as a society or we as a community of nations have done and failed to do, we pray for some sort of miraculous intervention. We want the serpents that have been set loose because of what we did and failed to do, to be rounded up and taken away. We want Moses to pray our prayer for us. And our prayer is: "God, rescue us from the consequences of our sin. God, rescue us from the consequences of failing to do the good we should have done in our yesterdays and the consequences of our having participated in the past in much that is evil." The story tells us Moses prayed for the people. And we, too, pray for the people. We pray to be delivered from the various snake pit situations in which we find ourselves.

God's response to Moses' prayer is interesting, and I think it is a profound reflection of the way God's grace works. God does not take away the serpents that were set loose because of human sin. God does not rescue the people, and miraculously place them in some sort of ideal, garden of Eden. Listen to what God said to Moses in this story: "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." And so, Moses made a serpent of bronze, placed it on a pole, so that snake bit people could survive in their serpent invested world.

God's merciful and redeeming grace does not undo our yesterdays and eliminate the consequences of our sinful behavior. We are not rescued from living among serpents; nor are we protected from being snake bit. But we are given what we need to live in our serpent invested wilderness where we are snake bit from time to time. God's grace does not take away the problems we have created by our behavior, by our society's behavior, or by the behavior of the international community. What God's grace does, is provide what we need for healing as we live in this serpent invested wilderness.

Maybe you think, like I do, that God is being a little harsh on these people. What kind of loving God would send snakes? Here's my take on it - it doesn't say it in the Scripture, but I wonder. The nation of Israel is going through the wilderness. This is snake infested country. There are things out there in the wilderness that can get you. And maybe, just maybe, Maybe God had prevented the snakes to come into the camp in the first place, divine protection, if you will. They were already in a bubble of protection. And the people grumbled We HATE IT HERE. and God said, "Fine, have it your way. You don't like my protection? I don't give you any protection." And the bubble of protection was removed and lo and behold, the wilderness has snakes! It would be like me talking to God about how my life isn't fair for whatever reason. God, you messed up. Life's not fair, it's your fault. And a loving God looks down and good ol' Pastor Mike and says, "You're right. It's not fair. Tell you what. To make it fair - I'll take back everything I've ever done for you, and you take back everything you've done for me." Sound fair. And all of a sudden, I'd be like, You know what? We're good. Lord, you give and take away, but there's been a whole lot more giving than taking away.

And what is the key to this healing for the people in the wilderness? In this story from the Book of Numbers, the key to being made whole is keeping our focus on the bronze serpent God told Moses to make. Is this some sort of superstitious act of magic that is being described? Of course not. That would be in conflict with the very commandments God gave us through Moses. What then is the lesson?

What I understand God is telling us to do is to keep focused on this reminder of God's grace. The serpents sent by God are a sign of God's tough love, God's love in the form of judgment. And this serpent God told Moses to make, is a sign of God's healing love, God's grace in the form of mercy. The message to the people was to keep their focus on reminders of God's grace, these reminders of both God's tough and tender love. Of course, the ultimate reminder, the ultimate gift of grace is Jesus Christ. When we are snake bit, the primary source of healing and wholeness is the grace of God made known in and through Jesus. I think it is worth noting that in the Gospel of John the writer uses the metaphor of this story to describe Jesus as the ultimate gift of grace, the ultimate gift of God's tough and tender love. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Whenever we find we are snake bit, it may be a symptom of our having wandered away from God. It is then, we need to focus once more on the reminders of God's grace. We need to look up and see the reminders of grace God has placed in our lives so that we will be brought to our senses and not only say: "Oh, yes. Now I remember." Let us thank God for the gifts and blessings we have received. God, as we move through the serpent invested wilderness of our lives, help us keep our focus on God and on God's grace as we move closer to the promised land. And the family of God said, AMEN.