

First Baptist Church of Augusta
Numbers 21:4-9
Journey Through the Wilderness: But What About Those Snakes?
March 22, 2009
Lent

I saw my first snake of the year just last week. It was an odd day to see a snake in the back yard, because it was a damp, chilly afternoon, with the temperature hovering in the upper 40's. I was pulling weeds that are popping up all over our zoysia lawn. Stooped low, I reached for another handful of clover, and there I saw what looked like a rather skinny, brown slug or healthy worm. As I gingerly pulled the tail, I discovered that this was a worm snake or perhaps a young mole snake. It definitely was cold and sluggish, but nonetheless, living. Amy was not as impressed as I was with our new-found friend, so we let him be, and soon he found comfort somewhere beneath our sod. I saw him, or her, or its sibling again yesterday in my garden, apparently feeling much better about the warmer weather.

I grew up with snakes, and learned to keep an eye out for them. There were always black “chicken” snakes, slithering around the grain bins. Alongside the creek you could spot a cotton mouth or water snake winding along the bank. In the early mornings, long black to brown snakes, we called “coach whips,” might be sunning along a path or rock. Nothing, however, could shake up your senses more than to hear the distinctive warning rattle of a timber rattler or diamond back, while walking in the pasture.

The thing about the outdoors is that it is the home of snakes. When tromping outside, one needs to remember that snakes are always around, but often hidden from view. “Ophiophobia” is the fear of snakes, and I suspect many of you here this morning qualify. I know people who are not only afraid of seeing them outdoors or even in a zoo, but do not want to see them on television or in a magazine or movie. My daddy claims to be repulsed by lizards, saying that they are nothing more than snakes with legs. Why is it that snakes get such a bad rap? Of Georgia’s forty or so native species of snakes, only six are venomous, but that doesn’t make a difference. Since the Garden of Eden, the wily serpent cultures have handled snakes with fear and awe and loathing. It makes little difference if you are from the frozen arctic, where snakes are non-existent, to the tropics, where they are in abundance.

Recent research suggests, that humans have evolved over time to fear snakes for the sake of survival. Early on, those humans who learned to fear snakes out in the wild, were able to pass on those survival genes. I suppose the suggestion is that those of us who do not particularly fear snakes, are not too bright! One of the researchers for this study, by the way, has the last name “DeLoache.” My father would not be impressed.

Maybe the last thing you want to hear about in a morning worship service, is a sermon where snakes are the center of the story. I was not on the editorial board of what made it into the scripture, so if you care about what is in the Bible, you had better get use to snakes, or serpents as they are sometimes called. If it makes you feel any better, most of the Bible’s references of snakes are permeated with fear and danger.

Let’s look this story out of Numbers more closely. Israel has been tromping around outdoors, because they have been set free from their Egyptian captors, by the hand of God through Moses. Out of their enslavement in Egypt, Israel found itself at a place she had dreamed about - the Promised Land. While they had not yet arrived, they were indeed perched on the peeking into the other side. Instead of going straight into the land of promise, however, Moses continues to lead them “around,” still in the wilderness.

The children of God were now miserable. In verse 4, we read, “*The people became impatient on the way.*” The Hebrew idiom is literally: "the people's soul was shortened" and so they took to complaining. A faithful reading of Numbers, tells us that their complaining is nothing new, and while this is their last complaint, it is a doozy. They form a “Back to Egypt Task Force,” and listed their grievances: “We are starving,” which they go on to modify by saying, “Well, we are not really starving, but we detest this miserable

food.” “Moses doesn’t know where he is going,” which may indeed be true, because they have been wandering now for nearly forty years.” There was one grievance, however, which we have not heard before, and it was leveled at God. Apparently, Israel could believe in God, but God could not be trusted when the journey did not turn out as they thought it ought. This proves to be deadly, not because God is thin-skinned, but that the wilderness and all of its threats was swallowing up the people and their hope. They lost sight of their vision and their vision-giver, and their journey began to spiral into meaninglessness – and when life loses a sense of vision and becomes meaningless, death is not far away.

Detours and diversions are frustrating. Israel is no exception and neither are we. We envision our life to take a certain path, but then something interrupts or disrupts, and it is as though we are marching all around the promise, but never realizing it.

That happens in these sojourns that go too long, that are burdensome, that are confusing, or threatening. Do you ever get just worn down by it all? Just when you think you are about to arrive you are knocked sideways by disappointment, or anxiety tightens its grip in your chest. During such times it is rather easy to lose sight, look down, and give up and form a “Back to Egypt Task Force.”

That is when the snakes come out. Let’s face it, this is a scary scene. In the Hebrew, they are called “fiery” snakes, presumably, because their venomous bite causes a burning sensation. Snakes are everywhere: slithering in bread baskets and pots, bed rolls and rugs, in the playground and laundry hamper – snakes are everywhere and they bite. It is like a horror scene from a cheap “B” movie.

Moses is instructed to make a serpent of bronze, lift it up on a pole, and when the people are bitten they can look up and be healed. Symbolically, the snake became both the image of death and life. While this sounds like a contradiction to us, snakes in the ancient world were represented in many similar complex mythologies. In Egypt, Mesopotamia, Canaan, and Greece, the snake or serpent was a symbol of evil power and chaos from the underworld but also a symbol of fertility, life, and healing. Throughout the ancient near east, the snake was the potent and paradoxical symbol of life and death. (*Interpreters commentary on Numbers*)

Today, when you go to visit a doctor you will notice the symbol for the American Medical Association, which is called the “Rod of Asclepius” – a snake entwined around a staff. Several theories are postured as to why the medical profession uses the snake as its symbol for healing. One theory is of Greek mythology – hence the name Rod of Asclepius. Another, is that was not a snake at all, but a guinea worm pulled from its host. Finally, some think it goes back to this very Biblical story. Regardless, snakes have a long history as ancient symbols of death and life.

Here in this story, snakes are both deadly and life giving. Specifically, snakes are used by God, who holds all of life and death. To remind the people of this, Moses is commanded to make a bronze snake and lift it up.

In the Mishnah, a rabbinic commentary, it is written, that the purpose of the bronze serpent on the pole was to redirect the people’s attention heavenward, because the wilderness journey is dangerous, and we are not just talking about snakes. We are talking about old fashion sin, the kind of sin that turns neighbor against neighbor; the kind of sin that no longer trusts or believes in God’s direction or God’s purpose, and therefore chooses to believe in fear, the kind of sin that believes promises come by one’s own hand and wit, instead of trusting in the provider of life and death.

More basically, this is a story that is repeated in different ways throughout scripture: sin of rebellion and God’s deliverance. In verse nine, we read of the response of God. Moses said to the people: *look and live*.

One cannot help but wonder and ask: *why doesn't God just accept their confession of sin and take care of the snakes with one word, one miracle, one action?* Instead, this snake on a pole is lifted up, and *after* you are bitten, look up and live. God takes care of the deliverance, but you still may get bitten.

This story, it seems to me, is not God taking care of the snakes that are out there – they apparently are still there in the wilderness and everywhere else for that matter. This is a story of saving.

Why does God keep doing this saving? Whether wandering and grumbling, and giving up in the wilderness, or driving nails in a cross, or grumbling against your neighbor, or breathing violence against an enemy? Why does God keep on delivering us, when all we are going to do is get mired up in our own mess...*again?* Snakes still bite.

I am not sure why, but I do know that Jesus thought of snakes, when Nicodemus wanted to know about God's deliverance. In our gospel reading this morning Jesus said: *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.* (John 3:14-15)

Yes, you say, but why does God keep loving us out of our mess? Read on: *For God so loved the world that he gave us his one and only son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life...God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* (vv. 16-17)

I don't know why God does it – love us out of our own rebellion – but God does, and this I believe. On this I stake myself, my reputation, my calling, and my vocation, that I, Greg DeLoach, am utterly and completely hopeless, because I am so soiled in my own sin, in my own recalcitrant and violent ways, in my own sneering, sarcastic, complaining ways. I know what I ought to do, yet, too often, I choose words and actions that left alone, lead only to death. Friends, brothers and sisters, time and again, I trod through this wilderness and lose sight of the promise and the hope and get bitten all over again by those snakes.

Thanks be to God for those out there that remind me, to paraphrase verse 9, to “look...and live.” Thanks be to God for the One who walked this earth and lived and taught and died and lives again, because, God so loved the world...God so loved me...God so loved you.

One author writes: “...This lifted-up One stands at the center of a redefined existence. The narrative invites us to be ‘re-centered’ around that gift of new life.” (p. 223, *Texts for Preaching*, Walter Brueggemann.)

If we are to live into that vision, that we are a City on Hill, as a teaching, sharing and being the presence of Christ in this region and world, then our lives must look up and believe in the deliverance of God. Look up and believe in the redemption of Christ. Look up and reject the forces, the voices, the ideologies and all other claims that keep us wandering.

Our mission and our vision calls on us to share this love. “Look...” so says our text this morning, “...and live.” “For God so loved the world...” For God so loved you, me...the world.”