

Scripture

Numbers 21:4-9

4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 5 The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." 6 Then the Lord sent poisonous[fiery - seraphim] serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7 The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. 8 And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous[seraph] serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." 9 So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3:14-21

14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Sermon: Bitey Snakes

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Today's old testament reading begins with a very familiar theme. God's people were griping and grouching. Murmuring, muttering, complaining, carping, whimpering, whining - there are many words to describe their attitude because they seem to have spent an awful lot of time in this place, doing these things.

'In Egypt, life was simpler,' they remember. They were slaves. They were born, and then they worked until they died. A good life, or at least, that was the way they chose to remember it. I always find it fascinating that those people who looked back on their days in captivity as a wonderful experience were unable to apply that same rosy viewpoint upon their present situations.

As we follow this people in the journey after their flight to freedom, we read that after three days of walking through the desert they came across water. This should be an amazing occasion for celebration - by day three they must have been getting more than a little worried about their survival - but when they found the water they complained. 'I don't like it, it doesn't taste good.' they said. I want to say that the bitterness they tasted might have been the bitterness of their own hearts, but, regardless, in the end

Moses fixed the water by throwing in some hyssop, which is part of the mint family, to make the water more palatable.

Once the water problem was solved they people needed food. God sent Manna – which tasted like honey cakes. It sounds like great stuff; if I lived in a palace I wouldn't get to eat honey cakes every day, much less if I were a beggar wandering in the desert, but the Israelites soon grew tired of their free food and yearned for meat.

In response to their grumbling God sent flocks of quail. It would seem that God was getting a little tired of his children's constant complaints because he said through Moses, 'Now I'll give you meat, and you will have to eat it. You will have to eat it not just for one or two days, or five, or ten, or even twenty days, but for a whole month you'll eat nothing but meat, until it comes out of your ears, until you are sick of it.'

Not surprisingly, it didn't take long for the people to begin to moan again – and quite incoherently. 'Did you just bring us out here to die?' they cried. 'There is no food, no water – and we hate this food.'

Have you ever watched one of your kids after school root through the fridge, moving aside all the cheese, and oranges, and sandwich meat, and leftover mashed potatoes, and yoghurt while complaining that there is no food in the house? There's no food – I hate this food.

The people complained against Moses, but this time they badmouthed God as well, and it would appear that God decided it was time for a little tough love.

'You want something to cry about? I'll give you something to cry about.' Have any of you ever heard that line from your fathers? God is about to have one of those moments.

'Here you go, Mr. no-food, don't like the food. Here are some bitey snakes for you. Now you've got a real problem, let's see if you still think that honey cakes for dinner is such a hardship.'

Secretly, many of us are nodding along on the inside – those ungrateful Israelites are only getting what they deserve, after all. They're whiners.

They just witnessed the most powerful nation on earth being humiliated at the hands of God: the Egyptian's crops were destroyed, the people ravaged by disease. They suffered consecutive invasions of pests and disgusting creatures, their children have been killed, and their army now rests scattered across the bottom of the ocean.

While the Egyptians were licking their wounds and wondering if they would be able to continue as a nation, the Israelites were drinking water from rocks, eating honey cakes that fell from the sky, and have heard the very voice of God shake the earth.

It's very easy for us to look back at them and wonder how they could be so off track. From our comfortable pews – well, comfortable pews might be an oxymoron - but from our largely comfortable lives we observe their lack of gratitude, we note their lack of faith. It's very easy to point the finger at them and declare them to be a stiff-necked recalcitrant people. In fact, it's even a little bit pleasurable. While we wouldn't necessarily admit it out loud, pointing out the flaws in others makes us feel superior.

Complaining in general makes us feel smug and self-satisfied – our cutting criticisms of others indicate our refinement; our denigrations mark our distinction. Perhaps we're not so different from those Israelites after all.

The Israelites were complaining about food and water and leadership – pretty basic stuff. What about us? What do we complain about? What gets us grumbling and griping?

Not so much food and water, for most of us these are merely matters of individual choice. But we do complain about leadership. Rarely does a day go by when something critical of Justin Trudeau doesn't come through my Facebook feed. Likewise with Kathleen Wynne. Locally, the decision regarding the community recreation hub has caused a lot of tongues to wag.

Within the church we are not immune from this. From time to time we also have issues with our leadership and with decisions that have been made, or decisions that we fear will be made.

The point is, though we might like to look down upon those ancient Israelites, in truth we are not very different from them. We too will find plenty of things to complain about, and if people five hundred years from now look back they will wonder what we were so upset about. They will think us foolish and petty, just as we regard the Israelites.

So, given that we are very much like those folks who challenged both Moses' and God's leadership, let's return to the scripture to learn what happened with them.

God's immediate response to the people who spoke against him was to send fiery serpents among them. These serpents bit the people, and many people died.

To their credit, it appears as though the people very quickly rethought their rebellion. They came to Moses and confessed their sin. Whether they were truly sorry, or if they just were afraid of the snakes is immaterial. For whatever reason, they did the right thing and came before God through Moses.

In response God did a curious thing. He accepted the Israelites confession and showed mercy, as we would expect, but not in the way that we might have thought. God didn't call off the snakes, at least, not right away.

Instead, God had Moses fashion a serpent out of bronze and affix it to the top of a long pole so that those who were bitten could look upon this image and live.

Several things come to mind when I contemplate this. The first is that there are consequences to our actions. Although the people repented and God relented in his anger, the fiery serpents remained among them, and continued to attack them.

The things that we release into our communities through our murmuring rebellion are not easily gotten rid of. They will continue to dog us, and pursue us.

Second – the serpent on the pole had a limited salvific effect. Those who were bitten could look upon the serpent and live. These serpents are described as fiery serpents in most translations, venomous serpents in others. The serpents weren't actually on fire; the serpents were fiery because their bites

burned. Many snakes' venom contain toxins that trigger pain receptors to cause sometimes paralyzing pain to the victim.

The bible doesn't tell us that the serpent on the pole provided instant healing or any kind of pain relief. The only thing being offered was that the sufferer would survive the ordeal.

The third observation was that the bronze serpent didn't offer any kind of blanket protection over the community. Once somebody was bit it was incumbent upon them to make their way to where the serpent was and look upon it. There was no universal saving grace emanating from the snake.

This is quite interesting because in much of the Hebrew Testament the Israelites rise and fall as a people – individual salvation is a bit of an alien concept – and yet we see hints of it here. The looking upon the bronze serpent seems to represent focusing our attention and our thoughts. God wants us to be aware of something.

Here's what I think this episode from Numbers communicates to us. Our rebellion against God introduces a hostile entity in our midst – the fiery serpents. Those fiery serpents are not easily gotten rid of; even though we repent, the forces of chaos that we unleash will continue to run amok.

Those serpents will cause suffering – to ourselves, and to those around us. Though God offers us life, the suffering that we cause will remain. The effects of sin are not so easily expunged.

And, there is something that God would like to turn our attention to; there is a word that we must know.

John writes of this word: the Word that was in the beginning; that was with God and was God; the Word that created everything, the Word that was life itself.

And John explicitly compares this Word with the bronze serpent of Moses and speaks of Jesus being lifted up so that those who believed in him, who turned their attention toward and gazed upon him, would have life.

It's a very apt comparison. The bronze snake personified and represented the sin and rebellion of the people and also the saving power of God.

When we focus our gaze upon the cross we see the very same things, only writ larger, and more clearly.

If you want to know what rebellion against God looks like, it looks like a body nailed to a cross. That is exactly what rejecting God and God's messengers looks like. It's an ugly, horrifying thing, and if this were the end of the story we would be lost indeed.

But this is not the end, because when we gaze upon the cross we not only see the effects of our actions, we also see God's action. Of course the Word, who created everything and is the life of men, cannot be bound or controlled by its own creation. What this means is that Jesus could only be nailed to a cross if he allowed it to happen.

Why would he do such a thing? Why not strike down his accusers and reveal the full power of God? Why not put us all in our places through force? Because, God so loved the world.

They say every preacher has one good sermon in them, and for me this is it – this is what I come back to again and again and again. God so loved his beautiful and broken creation that he was willing to die to demonstrate that love. He was willing to descend to the very depths of hell to show that no matter what we do, God has chosen to be forever God with us.

Jesus' final words to us in Matthew are 'I am with you always, to the end of the age.' This is the message of the cross.

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him; that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. Just as those who fixed their attention upon the bronze serpent lived, so too shall those who fix their gaze on the cross.

The cure for a snake is a snake. The cure for death is death. The cure for human life is one man's life, freely given.

On the cross we find that forgiveness had been declared before we asked; life overpowers death. What possible response can we have other than to drop our grievances against each other and live in celebratory love, giving all glory and thanksgiving to God?

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.