

“Snakes! Why did it have to be snakes?”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
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Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21

The movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark* has a scene in it that I really identify with. In this scene Indiana Jones is peering down into the Well of Souls, a stone chamber where the Ark of the Covenant is supposedly hidden. His companion asks, “Why is the floor moving?” Indiana Jones tosses his torch down into the tomb so he can see what’s slithering around in there. “Snakes!” he says. “Why did it have to be snakes?” As a twelve year old kid watching a pretty scary movie, I had to agree with him. Why did it have to be snakes?

I had a similar reaction when I was reading today’s lessons. Although I’m sure I’ve read this story from Numbers before, I didn’t remember it. In a way it’s almost comical. The Israelites have been wandering in the wilderness for years and years, and they just keep complaining against their leaders. This time they complain against Moses *and* God. So God sends snakes to bite them. Actually, the word is seraph and probably referred to something like a fiery serpent, but I can’t imagine Indiana Jones would like a tomb of fiery serpents any more than he would a tomb of snakes. Either way they’re poisonous and cause death.

That’s where the story stops being funny. Okay, so the people complain and God punishes them. We’re used to hearing the people complain and God giving them what they ask for. “We have no water,” they whine. God causes water to come forth from the rocks. “We have no food,” they complain. God sends them manna. Maybe not the best tasting stuff, but sustenance nevertheless.

These stories about the Israelites always make me want to yell at them and say, “Don’t you get it yet? The whole point of this journey is that you have to learn to trust God.” So I’m kind of on God’s side when I hear them complaining both that they have no food and that they don’t like the food that they have. I want to tell those fiery serpents, “Go snakes, go!” I have this cartoon image of people running around with snakes nipping at their heels like little terriers.

But they aren’t little cartoon terrier snakes. They’re fiery serpents, and their bite means death. Yikes! God sent poisonous, fiery serpents to kill people? That’s difficult to stomach, isn’t it? We don’t want to think of God like that. We could gloss over that part and get on with the rest of the story. The people repent and Moses prays to God on their behalf, and then God tells Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and put it on a stick so the people can look on it and be healed. But still, there’s a niggling in the back of our minds. God sent those snakes.

I’ll admit to you that I’ve really wrestled with this text this week. The conclusion I’ve come to is that this passage seems to be a microcosm of the story between God and God’s people. God has saved the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt and has led them into the wilderness on their way to the promised land. God has provided for them but they just keep rebelling against God. When God doesn’t do what they want, they turn away. God loves them but is angry with them and sometimes punishes them. Eventually the people repent and are reconciled with God. We hear this story over and over again throughout the scriptures.

For Lent this year I've been reading Miraslov Volf's *Free of Charge*, a book about giving and forgiving in our contemporary culture. In it, Volf describes some of the metaphors we use to think about God. Sometimes we may think of God as a negotiator, someone with whom we can make deals. If you give me this, God, then I'll give you that. Another image is that of God as Santa Claus, an infinitely giving jolly old person who gives without making any demands. A very different image is God as Judge, punishing human beings for each of their sins. The problem with this image is that as the world's sin increases, the only punishment big enough is destruction. Or we sometimes think of God as a doting grandparent. If the Judge condemns all our wrongdoings and punishes us for them, then the doting grandparent affirms everything we do and gives us whatever we need.

Volf claims that none of these images work for God. He sums up the world's relationship with God in this way, "The world is sinful. That's why God doesn't affirm it indiscriminately. God loves the world. That's why God doesn't punish it in justice."¹ Volf's image is God as forgiver, and he explains that forgiving means "to condemn the fault but spare the doer."² God does not affirm our sin, but God does forgive it. If we go back to the story from Numbers, God does not affirm the ancient Israelites in their sinfulness but instead sends the snakes. Once the people have repented and turned back to God, then the very snake that caused death becomes the thing that they must look upon in order to be healed. God acknowledges the sin, not just dismissing it or covering it over, but then God forgives the sin.

¹ Miraslov Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 140.

² *Ibid.*, 141.

That leads us to Jesus. In today's Gospel lesson Jesus compares himself to that same serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness. Whoever looks up and sees the Son of Man lifted on the cross, lifted up in resurrection, will have eternal life. The repeating cycle of sin and forgiveness, rebellion and reconciliation comes to its climax when God becomes incarnate and dwells among us as one of us. God is the one offended by our sin, and yet God became human in the person of Jesus and took on our sins. For God so loved the world...

Today is the fourth Sunday of Lent. We're halfway there. What can we take with us from today's encounter with scripture as we continue in our forty days of self-examination and repentance?

We could have a little more familiarity with a lesser known text.

We could think about how the cycle of sin and forgiveness plays out in our own lives. Are we confessing our sins and turning with repentance to God the forgiver, or are we hoping that God will simply overlook our sin and pretend it isn't there?

We could consider what images we use when we think about God.

We could spend some time staring up at the cross and reflecting on what it means to us. We don't see a serpent hanging there ready to heal us from a poisonous bite, but we do see the crucified Christ, who by dying and rising again gives us eternal life.

In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, after Indiana Jones says his famous line about snakes, his companion looks at him and says, "Asps. Very dangerous. You go first."

Very different from what I imagine Jesus saying. "Death. Very dangerous. I'll go first."