

March 15, 2015, 3rd Sunday in Lent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Numbers 21:4-9

God Loved the World

One spring afternoon when I was twelve or so, while hanging around with some friends after school, we saw a snake. In a strange act of bravado, I tried to pick up the snake, and it bit me. It was just a little garter snake, no big deal, but when I walked home and showed my mom the little teeth marks on my thumb, she felt so woozy she had to lie down. My mother has a great fear of snakes. She will never move to Florida, because she has heard they have lots of snakes there.

Many people live safely and happily in Florida, but my mother's feelings about snakes, the negative connotations of that creature, are widespread. Think of the role snakes play in the Harry Potter series, the kind of magic associated with them. When my husband and I lived at a boarding school in rural Tanzania, we once heard a sudden commotion, and then saw all the children yelling and running as a group across the campus. We wondered what on earth had happened, but soon learned that someone had seen a snake, and everyone was running after it to kill it. Of course, they had more than just garter snakes in East Africa; there are some very dangerous snakes there.

There are dangerous snakes in today's reading from Numbers, too, and it's a strange, if not dangerous story. Our church cycle of readings doesn't spend much time in this Old Testament book, which tells about the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel after their Exodus from Egypt. Maybe it's because it's full of all the setbacks, all the problems the Israelites encounter—and all the whining they do about it. Some people say that the book of Numbers is so-called because of the numbers of complaints the people have.

Some of these complaints have to do with their sense of their past, in light of an uncertain future. As God's people wander, without a clear picture of where they are going and what's next, they think back on, and long for, they wish they had again their lives back in Egypt—where, it should be pointed out, they were slaves. I think these complaints sound a bit like a cartoon I once saw, which has a grouchy person announcing, "Everything was better back when everything was worse!"

There are ways in which the complaints that start off today's snake story are also funny. The complaints begin: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?" Don't you love how this complaint answers its own question...with the worst possible outcome? "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt ... to die in the wilderness?" It's like: "Why are you hanging around with that person... who will wreck your life?" Or: "Why are you promoting a candidate ...who will destroy the city?" Or: "Why are you doing that project ...that will fail?"

Having come to their own conclusion about why they are wandering in the wilderness, so they can die, the children of Israel continue: "For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." This complaint is like saying, "We don't have any food—and it tastes terrible, too!" I have heard complaints like this. Sometimes, coming from children, such complaints sound like: "I don't have anything to do, and it's all boring!" To be honest, I have made this same complaint, or others that are similarly, if not more, immature: "I don't have anything to wear, and it's all out of style!" Or perhaps, "We don't have anyone to help us with this project, and they all have bad ideas!"

We can all probably identify with the children of Israel in their complaining. But here's where this reading gets dangerous: when after their complaining, the Lord sends poisonous

snakes, which bite the people, and many of them die. We can identify with the complainers, but I don't think we should identify with an image of a God that sends calamity as a comeuppance. I know this story in Numbers reads like that, and I know that you can hear people talking like that, using God language to explain suffering, saying things like: "This bad thing happened in my life as a punishment from God." Hear me loud and clear: that is a dangerous theology. We do suffer the consequences of sin, and these consequences can be deadly, but assigning the cause to God gives a limited, an immature, even a superstitious view of God and scripture.

Though this Numbers story has some strange, even pseudo-magical elements, and though I made light of the Israelites' complaints and some of ours, there is something serious and important at stake here: the reality of suffering. There is nothing make-believe about that, whether that suffering is self-inflicted, or whether it comes from an outside source, suffering is real. Hunger, distaste, unclear destination, and sickness unto death give us cause to complain. Alongside this story there are numerous passages in the Bible that give permission, even blessing to lament, to cry out in our distress. See Psalms, and many of its numbers.

Suffering is real, and suffering's poison can strike us down and make us wonder how or if we will recover. I think about people in intensive care units, or going through long processes of physical rehabilitation—people on our prayer lists. I think of people going through tremendous challenges at work, for example, one of my sisters-in-law, who just lost her job. She worked for a large and profitable company within which she was regularly promoted. She and my brother arranged their family's future around this job. Suddenly, she doesn't have it. Is this God's punishment? No. To read the whole story of their lives in that way, to read the whole story of the Bible in that way, is a misreading.

To know the whole story of God with us there are other numbers that need to be included, like the numbers from the gospel of John, 3:16 and 17. "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. Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that world might be saved through him." God does not do things so we may die, but so that we might live.

Strangely enough, did you notice how just prior to those great gospel verses, there is a reference to Numbers? "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of Man be lifted up?" There is a grace in Numbers, too, a grace that foreshadows and prefigures God's ultimate grace in Jesus. The grace in Numbers is not some kind of magic, not a good luck charm, though again, it may read that way: "Look at this bronze serpent on a pole and live." Instead, the grace of this parable-like snake story is this: One must look at the thing, the symbol, perhaps the concentration of one's suffering, acknowledge its existence. There is something of a "Name the pain," and a "Confess your brokenness," and also a "Face your fear" element to the healing God provides.

As Christians, we look at the snake, we even dare to touch it, for we know this snake won't bite, it can't bite, it is for it has been bronzed and twined around the cross. Indeed, God did not send the Son to punish, but to save. In Jesus, God responds to suffering and sin, to our numerous complaints with infinite love.