

4 Lent B  
*Living with Snakes*

March 17, 2024  
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

Numerous times during the Israelites travels in the wilderness during the Exodus, they complained about something. God seemed to respond with: "If you're going to complain about that little thing, I'll give you something to really complain about." After God made things worse. They recognize their faults. They entreat Moses to help them. Moses prays for the people. God listens. God responds to their complaint. Life gets better – until they begin complaining again.

Our First Reading is one of those instances. In our text the people complain about how difficult life is in the wilderness and they are sick and tired of eating this manna every day. God gives them something to really complain about – poisonous snakes, whose bite can kill the people.

The people cry out to Moses: "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." What they want is for God to remove all of these darn snakes. We can understand that.

Twenty-four years ago we visited my parents in Yuma, Arizona. I also was the guest preacher at their congregation. This was the assigned Gospel. (We were living in Wyoming at the time. This was years before I accepted the Call to the other ELCA congregation in Yuma.) It was a difficult time for our family. Dad had been diagnosed with terminal cancer earlier that year. We prayed that God would remove this darn cancer from him. It didn't happen. Perhaps millions are praying that God would remove all the darn cancers from the world. It causes suffering and death among us. It hasn't happened.

God's answer was not to remove the snakes, but he provided a way that their bite would no longer kill the people. "Whoever is bitten can look at the snake on a pole and live." The people had to learn to live with the snakes and snakebites. It meant trusting the word and power of God – that looking up at the bronze snake on the pole rather than the poisonous and deadly snakes on the ground – would bring them life.

This is the background we have in the gospel reading about Jesus, the Son of Man, the Human Being, being lifted up on the cross. We who look up to Jesus will have eternal life.

This was the promise we claimed for my dad when the cancer took his physical life. God did not remove the cancer from his body, but provided a human body on a pole. By looking at the crucified Jesus, we are assured that the cancer did not win. Death did not win. There was a resurrection. There is life beyond death.

That is true with all cancers. God has not removed them or many other sources of suffering and death that we humans face; but we have the promise that everyone who looks up to Jesus, the Son of Man, the Human One, on the cross, and believes in him will have eternal life.

In the book of Numbers, the real problem wasn't the snakes on the ground, but the obstinate people who over and over again turn against God and each other.

There was a time long before this when we are told that God was so upset with the human race that he destroyed them all except Noah and his family. The problem with us is us. The problem with humanity is that we're human. We, like the first humans, will disobey God – even if it's a simple command, "Don't eat the fruit of that one tree, but you can eat from every other tree in the garden." We know which tree they went and ate from. It is part of our nature to turn against God. The problem with us is us. We are sinners.

God has a way of letting us know when we have done wrong. He shines a light on our evil deeds and words and thoughts to expose them. After the first humans disobeyed, they were afraid of God. They tried to hide from God. They knew they had done something wrong.

Poisonous snakes reminded the people that they had sinned. We may have feelings of guilt, or have police officers come to arrest us, or simply suffer the consequences of our own misdeeds. God has ways of letting us know that we are sinful.

We can pray that God would take away the sin from our lives so that we would never do anything wrong again, God doesn't do that. Sin remains in our lives and in the world. We can improve on acts that help people rather than harm them. Then we'd probably feel proud about what good people we are.

God provides a way for us to live with the sin in our lives and in the world – and that includes all the diseases and cancers and natural disasters that can attack us in this sinful world. We need to look to Jesus on the cross. We are given eternal life. Our lives are not centered on all the problems that surround us below; but centered on the promises of God given to us through Jesus on the cross.

Perhaps more difficult for us is living with the difficult people that may come into our lives. "Brood of vipers," John the Baptist called them. They are like snakes that bring suffering to us. We can pray that God would remove them. We can pray that God would change them – God could transform poisonous snakes into cuddly kittens, but he didn't. There are times God converts people, but evil, treacherous, broods of vipers still remain in this world. We have to live with them.

It strikes me that living with snakes can mean doing everything possible to avoid walking near any of those poisonous snakes – doing everything in our power to avoid them so we don't get bit. We spend our lives looking down, living in fear of everything evil that might attack us.

The other option is to believe the word of God, and live looking up at the snake on the pole – the Son of Man on the cross - knowing that whenever might attack me, it will not defeat me. Living by faith in God – trusting what God has promised, means living without fear of the snakes – they cannot defeat me. God's promise and power is greater than their power.

So it is with death. No matter how hard we might try to avoid death, it will reach up and bite us at some time. We can live our lives in fear of the future – doing everything possible to avoid the things that might harm us – and just as we don't seek out poisonous snakes to bite us, we don't seek out things that could cause us suffering or death – but we live our lives by faith in God – trusting what Jesus has promised – looking at the cross without fear of death or what anyone else might do to us. We have been promised life – eternal life by God. God's promise and power is greater than the power of death or cancer or diseases or evil people.

We live by faith, not by fear in the midst of snakes and other evil things. The life God gives will defeat the death that nature brings.

Jesus defeated death. He is no longer on the cross. He is no longer in the tomb. He has been raised. We look to him. We have eternal life. We will live forever. The enemy of death is defeated. The snakes do not win.