

I'm not sure I have Good News to share today. When you preach, you're supposed to have Good News to share, but I'm not sure I do. You see, today's Scripture is about *snakes*. Yeah. *Snakes*. And I know that this is the first time that I'm preaching in this congregation, and I wanted to have some Good News to share with you--but today's Scripture, coming to us from the book of Numbers, is about snakes. *Not* my favorite topic to discuss when I'm new here. Because, y'all, I'm *afraid* of snakes. When I was growing up in Michigan, I spent a lot of time outside, camping and hiking and kayaking with my family. My dad was an avid gardener, mostly collecting various Michigan wildflowers and cultivating them in the rock garden outside our sun porch. Sometimes, dad would come inside from working in the yard with his hands cupped gingerly around "a surprise," inviting me to close my eyes and open my hands to receive the "gift." One time it was a cricket, one time a monarch butterfly, one time even a tiny baby bunny that had become separated from its mother...and one time, it was a very small, very slithery, bright green baby garter snake. Seven-year-old Anita was *not* pleased.

Almost everyone has a snake story, about being out hiking and seeing a snake, about getting creeped out by the snakes on nature documentaries on PBS, about finding a snake in a place where it shouldn't be. Furthermore, almost every human that ever lived had a snake story. You see, scientists have been researching over the past several years to find out whether a fear of snakes is inherent in human evolution. A recent study confirmed that infants as young as 6 months old will display a fear reaction when confronted with pictures of snakes...and spiders, for that matter, but that's another sermon.

This evolutionary bias against snakes makes sense. For early humans who didn't have the benefit of modern medicine, snakes posed a huge danger, particularly venomous ones. They might attack when ambushed as early hunter-gatherers searched for food in the tall grass, or in the rainforest, or in the desert. There's also the fact of how they move: it doesn't make sense to us. "Undulating" is usually the word that comes to mind for me as I watch a snake slither across the television screen in a shiny, slippery ribbon. Some scientists are actually stumped as to how snakes actually accomplish motion, some slithering at speeds as high as 6 miles per hour and some with the ability to climb trees. Snakes are good at showing up where we least expect them, such as the 6-foot-long Black Snake my uncle found coiled up on the motor of his kitchen refrigerator in his cabin in the Smoky Mountains; or like the large python that my friend in Ghana found sleeping in his bathtub one morning. Humans have pegged these unnerving serpents as animals-to-watch-out-for since the beginning of time, most ancient cultures preserving art and legends that depict snakes as necessitating great respect.

Just think of the imagery of snakes that we find throughout history, and even today, in our culture. Ancient legends regard snakes as everything from guardians

to demons to healers. The mysterious properties of snake venom are perhaps responsible for this, containing the potential for both harm and healing. Snakes are associated with the symbols of healing across ancient mythologies, such as being entwined around the rod of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, often depicted on hospital symbols today. More often, though, we lose the positive recognition of snakes and associate them only with the satan, the devil. They are depicted as cunning and sly. The Bible contains images of snakes as enticing tempters who spread gossip and incite sin. Just recall the Garden of Eden story: who is the bad guy? Who starts all this trouble? Yeah, I thought so. The snake.

With all this in mind, we can understand just a bit of how the Israelites were feeling as they wandered in the desert. They had been walking in the wilderness for decades at this point. The original generation of people who had escaped from Egypt was passing away and the younger generation was becoming cynical, wondering if they would ever arrive at the promised land. The mentality of the wilderness was one of confusion: “What are we even supposed to be doing?” “We’re bored!” “We’re hungry!” “Even if we had food, it would be bad!” “We’re tired!” “WHAT GIVES?!”

And then, to top off all the complaining, God sends snakes (!) among the people. Suddenly, the people can only look down at the ground as they walk, as they camp, as they continue to find the manna in the mornings among the dew. They are fixated on what is around their feet, listening for a rattle of danger, a hiss of death. Imagine the anxiety, the fear, the division they must have felt. Many of us today recognize, and resonate with, these emotions in our own lives and in our own cultural contexts.

So Moses prays to God to remove the snakes. But God is in the habit of surprising us and God does not remove the snakes. Instead, God points the Israelites to focus in another direction. Instead of looking down at their feet, fixating on the presence of venom at the ground-level, God bids the wilderness-wanderers to look up--at a serpent of another sort. A bronze snake, which Moses affixed to a pole and lifted high into the air, so that one who had sustained injury from a serpent might look at the bronze snake and live.

Wait, wait, wait, did God just entice Moses to erect an idol? Isn't this story about the same group of God's people who got into trouble with a golden calf? The same people who do a lot of complaining, only to repent and then start complaining all over again? What is God playing at, here?

At this point in our snake story, it's not surprising that we, Christians in a modern context, would be puzzled by this turn of events. Theologian and prolific writer Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “For some reason, Christians seem to jump to conclusions whenever there is a story with a snake in it. Sinister music starts playing in our heads. We sniff the air for brimstone as we reach around behind us

trying to find the [garden hoe to whack it with]. This is probably because we all believed our Sunday school teachers when they told us that the snake in the Garden of Eden was really Satan in disguise. Or maybe it's just that old snake-hating gene looking for a just war theory? But whatever it is, it won't work in this story. There is no Satan in Torah. All of the snakes belong to God."

All the snakes belong to God. Not to worry, everyone, because *these* snakes are God's special snakes that occupy our story of venom and healing, of fear and salvation. (!) The adjective describing the snakes in our Scripture today, from the Common English Bible, is "poisonous." The Hebrew word that describes the serpents is "serapim," which means "to burn" or "fiery." This "serapim" should bring to mind the "seraphim," the flying fiery serpents mentioned in the story of the call of Isaiah the prophet. The Biblical seraphim are the heavenly beings that guard the throne of Yahweh, the God of the people of Israel. Seraphim have a twofold charge in religious lore: to destroy and to protect. These seraphim are no doubt a far cry from the sweet pink-cheeked cherubs we can find as knick-knacks in Hallmark stores. These fiery serpents have some awesome power, some power that confounds death and life and exists somewhere in the in-between. With the connection with these famous angelic beings, the people of Israel (and those of us reading their story) would be smart to be at least a little wary of these serpents who slither among them in the wilderness. They know the snake stories, and are wise to be afraid.

Rev. Christopher McLaren from St. Mark's' Episcopal in Albuquerque writes in a sermon on this text:

"I think we have to admit it. This is a strange story. It is hard to explain, ambiguous and numinous all at the same time. The story is a story of salvation, of saving help, but it is a dark story of salvation. The story tells us something that Christians often don't want to acknowledge, that somehow in the hands of God, evil and good, threat and promise, life and death are all intertwined. It is hard to explain it, but we know intuitively that we are onto something. The truth is not simple or easy. It is complex and paradoxical. Deep truth is not easy to understand, it is not always tidy. It is a weird reversal of sorts. Moses takes the very image of the evil that is afflicting and frightening the people and recreates it into a salvation for the people. He takes their anxiety and fear and pulls it up from under them and puts it up on a pole and makes them look at it. He makes them stare their fear and anxiety in the face and, in doing, so they are saved. They find life in the midst of death."

This theme of life in the midst of death is not unknown to Moses, whose life was made possible by his mother helping him escape death declared to Hebrew baby boys by pharaoh's edict. This theme is not unknown to the Israelites, who

experienced the Passover of God's spirit that allowed them to live while the firstborn of Egyptian families perished. This theme is not unknown to me, who pursues a ministry of presence in the midst of a culture characterized by separation, distance and distraction facilitated by always-new technologies, self-centered individualism and ideologies that pass for patriotism. This theme is not unknown to us here at Seattle First Baptist Church, who by gathering here seek life, seek to know and be known, seek community in the midst of the death-dealing forces that control our world. In fact, it is appropriate to remember this particular snake story, replete with references to suffering and salvation, halfway through Lent. The gospel that is paired with today's reading is this: in the gospel according to John, Jesus is visited by a man named Nicodemus, who arrives under cover of darkness. Nicodemus comes wondering who Jesus is and what he's up to. He inquires how to gain eternal life and Jesus responds, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life."

Now THIS is a strange snake story. Why would Jesus compare himself to a snake, with all their messy cultural associations? And for goodness sake, we still have questions left from the Old Testament text: Why would God not take away the snakes? How could asking the Israelites to look directly at the thing they fear actually heal them?

Friends, Lent is the time when we remember being in the wilderness and live in the liminal space between life and death, between the miraculous birth and the death and resurrection of Jesus, between being bitten by the situations of our world and our lives and the promise of justice that Jesus' life-conquering-death story shares with us. And in this in-between time, where we live so much of our lives, God is asking us to look at that which we fear the most. The disciples had lots of practice doing this, as over and over and over they voiced fear and trepidation to Jesus, who always responded, "Do not be afraid. Follow me. I will be with you." So during Lent, we join Jesus' very human disciples as they accompany him in his ministry, as they follow God's very human Child and help him do the very human work of spreading the gospel of good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, release to the captives, and liberation to the oppressed. Minister and poet Jan Richardson wisely reminds us that "to follow God does not often mean traveling with certainty about where God will lead us. Rather, following God propels us to be present to the place where we are, for this is the very place where God shows up." In the midst of uncertainty, of all of the ways we experience wilderness in our lives, we know it can be hard to present. God is always doing Something New in our lives, inviting us to practice being present and join the dance of the Divine. Standing on the cusp of the Something New is pretty overwhelming, especially, say, if you are finishing a degree and contemplating a move across the country and

meeting a bunch of passionate, kind people you want to do ministry with. It's hard to be present when I have to return from Seattle to Nashville to finish required classes and write a few more papers, but I know that God will show up there, too, hopefully with some extra motivation and some editing skills and perhaps some chocolate. Just as God shows up here, with us, right now, with what we need to be present where we are.

In this story, the Israelites had to be present where they were. The physical pain of a snakebite and the ensuing complaints and cries from families and friends called them to be present, right then and right there in the wilderness. While they were being present, perhaps angry and frustrated and hurting, perhaps they realized, ever so slowly, that God was there, too. Perhaps they realized that God was not going to take the snakes away, God would not take the origin of the fear and the pain away. But God *would* point them in the direction of healing.

Friends, we know by the simple fact of living in this world that God does not always remove the source of pain. There are not always clean breaks, easy answers, equal shares of hurt, fears that get banished once-and-for-all. Often we must hold onto pain far too long for any of our liking. Sometimes we are even afraid of letting go of our pain. Like the Israelites, we can only look down at the ground, at the source of our pain, wandering in the wilderness staring at our feet, absorbed in our own worlds. The fears and hurts we carry with us, that are written on our skin and enfleshed in our hearts, sometimes become part of our identity such that we can get stuck in one place. Barbara Brown Taylor asks, "What concrete things do we focus on that epitomize our fear? In what sense do these things become idols that keep our fear in place? What is God capable of doing with these idols, once they have been plucked out from under our feet and set up on a pole where we can see them clearly? How does God respond to our fear, both in the wilderness and at the foot of the cross?"

In this Scripture text, we find that God shows the Israelites, those complaining wanderers, that moving towards healing is possible if they face their fears directly. To confront any fear or past hurt or injustice, we must know the shape of the challenge, what it looks like, how it moves, so that we can figure out how to move beyond it. We must shed light on that which is cast in shadow, not only the hidden parts of our lives, but also the pieces of our cultural identities and lives which we keep under wraps, which we deny and brush under the rug. It is only by exposing the forces that divide us--racism, nationalism, classism, heterosexism, misogyny and many others--that we can begin to confront them. And, it seems, in a world that is bent on dividing us, we have no choice but to create the beloved community amongst ourselves, so that we can fully participate in the larger world. Can you visualize it, the beloved community? Can you hear it calling, this world that is possible? To do this, we must move towards healing,

towards restoration, though the wilderness may be full of snakes, and though we may not be sure in what direction to fix our attention.

The snake story we consider today points us to recognize that we live in the tension, between that-which-harms-us and that-which-heals-us. The bronze snake on the pole may look at first glance like the death-dealing forces that every human life encounters, but we are surprised to find it is really the anti-venom, the healing that might sting at the time but that allows us to continue. Snakes in ancient mythology symbolize this tension but also symbolize transition and transformation. They shed their skin. Snakes show us that living between death and life can be dangerous and can be healing. We all live in this space of tension, but we also have the potential to be transformed on our way to healing. And friends, the Good News is that transformation is possible. Though we remain mostly the same person as before, the process of healing can resemble a sloughing-off of skin. Like the snakes in our story, there is something different between the snakes that slither among God's people and the bronze serpent exalted on a pole; perhaps this, too, is a matter of shedding the layers of myth, legend and superstition about snakes representing sin, evil, and the demonic. As we journey towards healing, we must acknowledge the layers that we let go: maybe we let go of lies about ourselves, whether self-told or from others. Maybe we slough off the pieces of ourselves that have not obscured our true identities as beloved children of the Holy. Maybe we shed the myths about ourselves, our families, our cultures, our world that have been proven only to deal in destruction instead of give life abundant. This transformation, this shedding of skin, requires vulnerability. Are we willing to face our fears, our pains, our challenges head on, eye-to-eye, looking up instead of down? Transformation is a worthy risk.

The Hard News is that transformation is also a process. Healing is not a one-time event, it is a sometimes slow, somewhat tedious process of sloughing off the dead skin, the layers of pain, the rough edges left by trauma and trial. Moving forward in the journey through the wilderness is not made possible by a single moment, but many moments of complaining, doubting God's love and liberation, and falling into sin...and then repeating this process over and over again. The Israelites are tired and hungry and wonder what it truly means to be the chosen people, and then here God comes, saying, "Look into the eyes of your past. Gaze upon that which scares you. I will be with you through it all." I kind of wish that it wasn't a snake a pole that I had to look at to be healed; I have to admit it'd be a lot nicer if it was a cricket, or a butterfly, or a bunny...but the truth is that the Israelites, that *we*, have to look at a snake. This may not be a necessarily comforting message, but it's an honest one.

God's people had to choose to face their fears directly, to look in the eyes of the bronze snake and believe they would be healed. Church, a choice lies in front

of us as well. How often do we know what it might take to heal ourselves, to heal our world...and yet we make a different choice? We look away. We hide our eyes. We lack whatever it is that gives us the strength to be vulnerable...perhaps we don't trust God to come through for us, perhaps we don't believe in the power of this snake on the pole, the thing that God Herself placed there so we would use it to heal ourselves.

So, church, what if we look directly at that which scares us? What if we face our fears directly? What if we risk vulnerability and simply focus on God's presence with us, at all times, no matter what fears come our way?

Transformation takes time. Though we may not want to spend time wandering in the desert for forty years, though some of us may feel like we have been, we must acknowledge that this shedding our fears and moving beyond our pain is a process. When God instructs Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole, God does not say that the people will all be healed at once. God leaves the snakes. The snakes may continue to pose a threat to the people. But whenever someone is bitten, they must only choose to look in the direction of the bronze snake and they will be healed. By turning their attention to the possibility of healing, by looking their fear square in the eyes, they will not perish from their wounds but persist. God's people in this story show us the very process of living in sight of serpents: fear, anxiety, pain, healing, redemption...then again: fear, anxiety, pain, healing, redemption...then again and again and again. We *face* our fears. We *confront* our pain. We are *honest* about our needs. Over and over we must choose to fix our gaze on that which is life-giving, that which is life-affirming, even and especially in the midst of the powers of the world that seek to keep us looking down, concerned with the venom poised and ready at our ankles.

Maybe there is some Good News in this snake story after all, moving in ways that are hard to understand, and showing up where we least expect it. Dear friends, when we are in sight of snakes, focusing only on the anxiety and hurt that holds us captive, remember this: God is with us all the time, in all places. God never leaves us to face our fears alone. The Holy One shows us how to point our vision toward healing. As always, the Good News is complicated, it's difficult, but it's real. It's honest: God's presence is with us at all times, through the pain, showing us the way to healing, accompanying us and holding us at every turn. May it ever be so.