

Sermon for Christ Church, Spotsylvania, VA
Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B, March 11, 2018
The Rev. Bill Queen, "A Dangerous Place"
Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-29

I expect that many of you will not agree with my sentiment, but I like snakes; I am fascinated by snakes; I think they are one of God's most amazing creatures; they come in a wonderful variety of colors—some so bright you can see them from far away, some so well camouflaged that you can hardly see them at all; they move in the most graceful fashion; without having arms, legs, or wings they go everywhere—watching a snake climb straight up the trunk of a tree is an amazing sight, as it seems to defy the laws of physics and gravity

I like to get close to snakes—Lynn Ellen is not too happy with me about this—but I do; I have photographed rattlesnakes, water moccasins, and copperheads, as well as harmless ones from up close; there is a picture of me on Facebook from a few years back holding a baby black racer in my hands with this caption, "Look Bishop, Episcopalians do handle snakes!"; now I don't want to scare anybody, but right about now, in early springtime, is when snakes tend to start coming out; so if you feel something down around your feet, don't be alarmed; only harmless snakes would come into church

here in our reading from the Book of Numbers today we have snakes, lots of them, doing very nasty things to people; but it says clearly that God sent those snakes, so we can't blame the snakes; God could have chosen deadly scorpions to bring about the same punishment to the people if God had wanted to

they are being punished because they were grumbling against God; now death by snakebite might seem a stiff punishment for grumbling, but look more closely at what they were grumbling about: food, but not just any old food; they were grumbling about the heaven-sent manna, the miraculous food that appeared from nowhere, that allowed them to eat their fill and stay alive; the moral of this story is you might get away with generic grumbling, but you won't get away with grumbling about God's miracles

the people repent of their grumbling, and God provides Moses with the cure for anyone who has been bitten: look at a bronze snake on a pole and you won't die from the bite; you can still see that image of the snake on a pole used to symbolize healing, in the center of the blue EMS star of life

notice: there is one very significant thing that does not happen in this story; the people ask God to get rid of the snakes, but God does not do that; looking at the bronze snake on the pole will cure them, but the snakes will still be there, and the danger of getting bitten will still be there; if God had just gotten rid of the snakes the people might easily have forgotten their lesson about grumbling and forgotten about their daily dependence upon God; so what is the lesson for us from this odd old story?; it is a reminder that the world is a dangerous place, even if you don't have poisonous snakes underfoot

the world is a dangerous place, physically; there is always the danger of an accident any time you go out on a road, whether you are in your car, on a bike, or as a pedestrian; there is the danger from an injury around your home or doing a recreational activity; and there is the danger from any number of illnesses

the world is a dangerous place, spiritually also; there are always temptations to sinfulness and evil any way you turn; there are so many ways we can hurt each other and damage the relationships with people around us; and there is the danger of seemingly innocuous distractions—distractions that pull our attention away from God and pull our attention away from the kind of life that God would have us lead

the world is a dangerous place, and like the story about the snakes, God has never promised to remove the physical or the spiritual dangers from our midst; the dangers will always be there, throughout our entire lives; I'm not saying that God sends us our difficulties as punishment, the way that the snakes were sent; what is true of this particular story is not the way that God generally deals with us; most of the dangers of life are part of the make-up of creation itself; life on earth is not—and was not ever—intended to be a perfect place

yet while God has not promised to remove the dangers, God does promise to be there with us throughout our entire lives, and whenever we experience any kind of physical or spiritual setback, to offer us the healing we need; not a healing that cures every illness or fixes every problem—that would be removing the snakes—but a healing through receiving love from God and continuing in an ongoing relationship with God, which is in itself more valuable than anything else we might receive

God hasn't given us a bronze serpent raised up in the air on a pole to look at for our healing; as John's Gospel tells us, God has given us Jesus, raised up in the air on a cross for our healing; as Jesus puts it in his own words, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life;" that sums up the ultimate purpose of Jesus' life, further summarized in the famous verse that comes next, John 3:16, "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."

in his lifetime on earth Jesus suffered temptation, shame, betrayal, and pain; and each of these to a far greater degree than anything you, or I, or any other human ever has, or ever will, experience; in the midst of his worst difficulties he kept his eyes fixed on God, knowing that God was there for him

I once had a parishioner who seldom came to church; he received a diagnosis of a incurable cancer and was given about one month to live; we talked and prayed about how he might best use the time he had left; he found great consolation in reading and rereading the Psalms; he found his peace with God through them; and he used that last month of his life to reconnect with loved ones and friends in new and deeper ways; more so than he might ever have otherwise

that's what God calls 'redemption;' that does not mean putting things back the way they were before; God didn't prevent Jesus' crucifixion or undo it by returning him to his human life; God redeemed Jesus from his death on the cross into his new resurrected life; God gave him something better than before—something eternal; God did not cure that parishioner's cancer, but God redeemed his life, giving him something better than before—and something eternal

in our lifetime, no matter what we have to endure, no matter what snake-like dangers and difficulties beset us, we keep our eyes fixed on God, knowing that God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are there always for our healing, are there always for our redemption, for both our life here on earth, and for eternal life