

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 14, 2021
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I.

My dad and I would always laugh about one of the strangest dinners we ever shared. He and my mom had come to visit us—mainly to see our two young boys, their grandchildren—and so we all went out to eat to celebrate our time together. After we ordered delicious food and were beginning to imagine the wonderful meal ahead, one of my children turned to my father. And, with a gleeful look on his face he said, “Now, Papa, tell me all about venom.”

Being the good grandfather he was, dad decided that despite the meal we were about to enjoy, he would comply and went into what I believed to be a little too much detail about venom and poison. He talked about rattlesnakes who let us know if we are threatening them by shaking their noisy tails. He talked about copperheads who don’t usually strike the first person that steps over them...they wait for the next. He talked about the coral snake who has such a small mouth and teeth that, really, they aren’t a threat...unless you give them enough time.

But still, entranced, my sons wanted to know more. So, dad told them about spiders. Brown recluses which hide in dry hot places like cardboard boxes in an attic. Or the black widow with her red hourglass. Of course, he said, most spiders have some venom...but not enough to be a real threat. Then dad turned to fire ants and bees and hornets. The wild plants like nightshade and belladonna and the sap of the poinsettia. And the death angel, the most beautiful, white mushroom that waits a while before it kills you.

I have never been more relieved to see a meal arrive so that we could finally change the subject.

II.

But the story we read today from the Hebrew Bible is about the same sort of thing. Poison. Venom. Things that kill you. The Israelites have been wandering in the wilderness for almost 40 years. And it is becoming painfully clear that the wandering is, in fact, their own fault. God has led them to the promised land and told them to enter. But except for two brave spies, the people refuse to believe that the land is safe. They cannot trust that the God who has delivered them from slavery can still be trusted to lead them into a land that they believe is occupied by “giants.” And so, through their own inability to trust God, they are doomed to wander in a wilderness of their own making instead.

As they wander, the Israelites complain. Their gripes are a variation on the same themes we have heard before: “Moses has brought us into the wilderness to die. We don’t have anything to eat— well except manna, but you get tired of the same old thing. We used to have cucumbers and onions and melons in Egypt.” Their complaints have almost stopped making sense. “We don’t have anything to eat!” they groan. “But what we do have to eat, we hate!”

As nonsensical as the complaint has become, this time, the grumbling goes one step further. Now the Israelites not only blame Moses. They also blame God.

God is understandably frustrated and a little fed up. He has led them right up to the border of the promised land and still his people have failed to trust him. Not only that, they are blaming God for their predicament! So, as the rabbis interpret the story, God decides that since his people do not appreciate his care and protection, he will take it away. And the vipers and snakes that have been in the desert with them all along now begin to bite the Israelites and kill them.

The people don’t know what to do. Once again confronted by the consequences of their own bad choices, they turn to Moses. And Moses in turn prays to God. But God’s answer is

strange enough to get our attention. “Make a metal serpent,” God tells Moses. “Put it on a pole and lift it up where all the people can see it. Tell the people that if they look at the metal serpent then the snake-bites they suffer won’t kill them.”

We have to wonder: Couldn’t God could have just as easily taken away the snakes altogether? God could have taken away the venom? But instead, God asks the people to try to trust him once again. If they do what he says, the snake bites will not be deadly. All they have to do is look up.

III.

This story from the book of Numbers is strange enough that we typically skip over it, preferring the stories of manna in the desert and water from a rock. We would prefer not to talk about venom and snakes and all these things that scare us, even still. Except that when we turn to our Gospel reading for today, Jesus has brought this story of serpents and poison back up in his conversation with Nicodemus. As they talk, Jesus draws a parallel between the ways that Moses lifted up the serpent on a pole and the way that he too, as the Son of Man, will be lifted up. For Jesus, both images—the serpent and the cross—are reminders of the saving action of God.

At first this seems confusing. After all, the serpent is the very image of the thing that was killing the Israelites. And the cross is, in reality, a weapon of torture and death. But perhaps that is the point. For just as the snake on the staff showed the Israelites what was killing them, the cross shows humans the thing that is killing us. And it isn’t Jesus. It is ourselves. It is what we, in our sin, would do to another human—what we, in our sin, would even do to God with us.

These stories—the stories of Moses’ serpent on a stick and even the story of the cross—remind us of how far we have gotten off track. And in them we recognize that reminders of

God's grace are not enough to fix things. We have to, at some point, face our own sin. Our own mistakes. Our own brokenness. **In other words...in order to be healed and brought back to life, we have to face the things that are killing us. We have to face ourselves.**

V.

These days most sermons skirt around the issue of sin, at least in my tradition. We gesture towards it but usually quickly move on. People don't really want to talk about things that have gone wrong. And pastors repeatedly get pulled aside by parishioners for a gentle, or not-so-gentle, scolding when they choose to name a sin when they see it. Sins like racism or white supremacy. Sins that cause us to hate whole groups of other humans or decide they have no place in our society or our church. Sins that burrow deep into our psyche like conspiracy theories that bend the truth. Or sins that cause us to use our planet or other people as commodities that can be wrung out and then thrown away.

Maybe we don't like to talk about it. But, of course, we must. Because as it takes root, sin misshapes everything we do. And while we are busy trying to convince ourselves and others that everything is fine...that we've moved past all that...as we try to explain away our sin or pretend we aren't afraid, its poison is already at work, slowly leeching away everything that makes our lives beautiful or good.

VI.

Our Scripture today forces us to face what scares us the most. It reminds us that it is not until we are able to tell the truth—when we are able to be honest about our sin and our need for God—that the bronze serpent and the cross can move from symbols and signs of our own sin and brokenness to new signs of healing and hope.

After all, when the Israelites looked at that metal snake, they did not see another snake that would kill them, but instead they were reminded that God could heal. And when we look at the cross, we come face to face with how terribly far the sin of humans will go. We see an imperial tool of torture and death. But we also come face to face with Christ. And in Christ we are reminded of just how far God will go to reach us.

It's in this crucible of promises and love, sin and pain, that we come to understand the true depth and power of God's love. We are reminded that God can take even the most lethal and deadly parts of our world—the most sinful and selfish parts of ourselves—and find ways to redeem them and remake them into instruments of healing and hope. If only we will let him.

We don't often like to talk about the things that scare us or the things that we suspect might be killing us. Like that dinner from years ago, often we are relieved when the conversation (or the sermon) about those things comes to an end. And yet, perhaps our Scripture reminds us of something we have forgotten or ignored. It is only when we are willing to look sin full in the face... it is only when we are able to name the ways that we have been poisoning ourselves, our relationships, our world...that we can also fully recognize how much we need God to help us, redeem us, and save us. And when we come face to face with that kind of power, that kind of love, we are changed. We are saved. So, let's not turn away, my friends. Let's look up. And live. Amen.