

Lent 4 (B)  
March 22, 2009  
Texts: Numbers 21:4-9  
John 3:14-21

Pastor Aaron J. Couch  
First Immanuel Lutheran Church  
Portland, Oregon

Out of the corner of my eye I saw something move. I turned and saw, near the gate in the back yard, a snake slithering through the grass. I didn't pause to consider what kind of snake it might be, whether it might be poisonous or not. I instinctively reached for a rock to throw, because at that point what I wanted most was for the snake to be gone—not just gone from my back yard, but gone completely, gone to never come back.

Now, there is a rational part of my brain that finds snakes interesting, that sees beauty in the graceful way they move, that likes the smooth, dry feel of their scales, that appreciates snakes as fascinating creatures. That rational part of my brain was not the part that got stimulated when I was surprised by movement on the periphery of my vision. Instead, it was the part that is moved by elemental fears—ironically, the part referred to by some as the “reptilian brain.”

One of our Bible readings for this morning is about snakes, and I wonder whether it gave you the creeps—or whether it made you think that snakes are really very misunderstood. It's a strange story we heard—and the more time you spend thinking about it, the stranger it gets. To start with, doesn't it seem just a little bit like magic? Look at the snake, get healed? And then just last week one of our scripture readings was the 10 Commandments. And the second commandment says, “You shall not make any graven image of any creature.” So why does God command Moses to make a serpent of bronze and put it on a pole? And how did a strange story like this wound up in the Bible at all?

So let's look at this story a bit. The tribes of Israel are in the wilderness, and they do what they've done many times before—they become impatient and complain against God. I love the inconsistency in what they say: “There's no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food!” Wait—I thought there was no food! In the past, when the people complained like this, God met their whining with undeserved generosity. God provides everything they need and more.

But this time there's a surprise. Instead of undeserved generosity, God sends poisonous snakes, and they bite the people, so that many of the people die. So the people come to Moses. They say, “We have sinned. Pray to the Lord for us to take away the snakes.” So Moses prays to God—and then here's another surprise. God doesn't take the snakes away. Don't you think that would be the simplest and most straightforward solution? Just make the snakes go away.

But God doesn't do that. Instead, God instructs Moses to make a snake of bronze and put it on a pole for the people to look at. And if they're bitten and look at the bronze snake, they'll live. It's such an untidy story. It smacks of magic. So why do we have a story like this?

I think the stories that got passed down through the generations, the stories that people remembered, aren't only the ones that grab your attention in some way, but also correspond to the way we experience life. And it seems to me that there are a couple of ways that this story corresponds to our experience, and to the experience of people of faith in every generation. And for that reason, this odd little story can serve to shine a light on our struggles, our hopes, and help us see how God is working for healing in our time.

It isn't difficult to put ourselves in the place of the people of Israel. Like them, we're on a journey. And sometimes the journey is difficult, or painful, or confusing. And sometimes we can make things more difficult, more painful, by our sin or by our lack of faith. It may not be a snakebite, but there are consequences to being selfish, or impatient, or irresponsible. And those things can come back to bite us. And even when we've acknowledged our sin, the consequences might not just go away. Sometimes we have to continue to deal with snakes in our lives.

But even in the midst of the problems, God is able to provide a way of healing. God doesn't do away with the snakes. Instead, God nurtures life and hope and wholeness while the snakes are still there. You know what I mean—if you've gone through a life-changing crisis, something that scared you, but then you discovered that God gave you courage to meet the challenge, regardless of how things turned out. Or maybe there was a time when you were deeply worried about someone or something, but then found peace by releasing those concerns into God's care. Or maybe you've gone through a time of loss and grief, but then experienced that God can give us a way to start again, to create a new life. Or maybe you've felt burdened by feelings of guilt, but then heard the promise of God, that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Then you know that it's no small thing for the Creator of the universe to wipe away your guilt, or give peace, or be present with you in this journey of life. God meets us in surprising ways to work for wholeness and healing in our lives.

And not only in our lives, but also through us, God wishes to work for light and peace and renewal. And the surprising thing is, it's often through our own wounds and our own brokenness that God can help us see how we can serve others, how we can make a difference for others. And every one of us comes here wounded in some way, broken in some way, snake-bit in some way. I know someone who experienced hunger when she was growing up. Now she

loves to share her gifts for cooking, whether it's preparing a feast for a large group of friends, or supporting the foodbox program, or serving dinner at one of the downtown missions. It is her joy to see that people are fed. I know someone else who grew up in a home where there was verbal abuse. One of his parents could cut people down with a word, and make them feel "this big." Now, as an adult, in his free time he volunteers with an agency that helps people who are overlooked and invisible, because he sees them. He sees them as children of God.

There's one last piece of wisdom in this story. It helps if we have some kind of sign or symbol that reminds us to look for God's healing power, and to know that it is for us. Maybe it's coming in this building, or coming to the altar to receive the bread and wine of Holy Communion, and hearing that these gifts are for you. Maybe it's an old, battered Bible that's been passed on to you from your grandparents. It's a symbol of God's faithfulness through the generations. Or maybe it's one of these bright, beautiful prayer shawls that can be a reminder of friends praying for you, praying that God will be working in your life for wholeness, for your wellbeing.

In our gospel story for today, we are reminded of the deepest symbol of God's faithfulness, of God's relentless work to bring healing to this world. It is the cross, where Jesus was lifted up, where we see that God will stop at nothing to set us free, to give us life, and to draw us into an eternal embrace of love. In the cross, we see God's heart, how God loves the whole world so that he gave his only son, so that everyone who looks to him might not perish, but have eternal life. Thanks be to God. Amen