

Numbers 21:4-9 “The Snake on the Pole” Rev. Jim Schubert St. Luke’s Episcopal Church 3/14/2021

Today in the reading from the Old Testament we encounter a strange story involving snakes. It also involves complaining and healing. In short, here is the situation. Moses is leading the Israelites through various desert wanderings. Along the way the people keep complaining that they should never have listened to Moses and left Egypt. Yes, they were slaves there, but at least they had enough to eat. But also, along the way God provided. They complained about food and God gave them daily manna and quails from the sky. Then they complained again when they were thirsty and God told Moses to strike a rock, which created a gush of water. Then they complained again. And that is where we are today.

When the complaints started up again-there is no water and we detest the food we are given, a bunch of snakes appear and they bite the people. Many died because of these bites. Oh, Moses, we are so sorry we are complaining, they say. Ask God to take away these snakes. So Moses prays for the people, again. And the Lord tells Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole and “everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” In other words, -Look at what you are afraid of and be healed.

And here we are, in the 21st Century, looking at this old text. How does it make any sense to us? Well, let me suggest this speaks to us on two levels-the spiritual and the psychological.

One thing that you may recognize is the snake on a pole. Many of you may have seen this symbol on various modern medical signs-it is a symbol of healing. Often the snake is wrapped around the pole. Actually this is an ancient symbol which came out of mythology. There was an Olympian god named Hermes. He was seen as a messenger between the various gods and the underworld. He was supposed to have carried this symbol as he went back and forth. Also there was another god, the son of Apollo, who was a healer. He carried this symbol of the snake on a pole. So there is some very old symbolic stuff going on here. Then let’s look at the Bible. The snake-or serpent, shows up as early as Genesis. In scripture, the snake is often the symbol of chaos-kind of the wildcard of creation.

How does this snake-this chaos enter our lives? If we trust Holy Scripture, it comes along and in a sense “bites” us because we (like the Israelites) deny the blessings of life and refuse to offer thanksgiving, and instead just keep complaining about our fate. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were not content to simply live in God’s blessings. They listened to the snake and wanted more. Let’s face it. Many of us our like that. I have enough money to buy groceries and put gas in the car and have friendships, and have been covered with the grace of God so many times-yet, there is something always lacking, and I complain. Oh, yes, I have all this, but my goodness, the sink is dripping, the cat woke me up at 5 a.m., my computer is acting up, the stock market went down, I am not losing weight like I want to, Netflix doesn’t yet have the movie I want to watch, the chicken I just baked doesn’t taste as good as Costco’s, - and on and on. We have the blessings over and over again, but just like the people with Moses, we are focused on what we lack and not on the blessings. We spend time complaining, not giving thanks. And out come the snakes and then we are afraid. It starts to cascade and becomes a pattern in our lives. We have set up a framework on which to base our daily life. And then we wake up at 3 a.m. looking at the ceiling and the larger fears emerge.

Yes, we have these trivial complaints-the computer glitches and meowing cats and the like, but there are deeper fears that emerge. Research has been done on the most common fears we all experience. Do you know what they are? Number 1 is Loneliness, then comes Death (especially a painful death), then Public Speaking, spiders, intimacy, going crazy, germs, poison and getting old.

Can any of you relate to any of this? Are you willing to identify your fears and place them on a pole and really look at them? I don't know. We often live lives of denial and hide this shadow side of who we are and what we are experiencing.

Some of you may know of Carl Jung who was a psychotherapist who was a contemporary of Sigmund Freud and lived and wrote at the turn of the century and died in 1961. He said we all live with this "shadow side." It is the part of us that is full of fears, and we continually try to suppress all these shadows. We just celebrated Groundhog Day. And what happened to him when he saw his shadow. It was back in the hole for six more weeks. Jung's theory that he used with his patients was that we should embrace this shadow side and not deny it, or hide from it, and it will lead to more sane living and make us whole. In a sense he encouraged his patients to put those unpleasant aspects of our being—all those fears we want to hide, -up on a pole in a sense, and not consider them enemies that haunt us, but are strange friends that will actually help us move to healing and wholeness.

Part of the problem posed here in the scripture lesson is that of honesty. And through honesty comes healing. The Lord told Moses to put that poisonous creature up on a pole—and then have the people stare at it. They will be healed. Put the feared thing up on the pole. Look at it. Really look at it.

I must admit, this is not always the easiest thing to do. I guess you can do it privately, but the bigger risk, with bigger rewards, is to do this with people who care about you. Can you talk about loneliness or your own death, with yourself, or with others? What about health issues or family conflicts? Personally, I am a very private person, and emotionally restrained— as that is how I was raised; but with a trusting spouse, friends, and recently many of the Zoom meetings I have attended at the church, like the Wednesday morning Healing Service and one of the Bible studies. I have discovered that opening yourself up to vulnerability does not cause the roof to collapse, but actually is freeing.

Whether it is loneliness or death fears, or your health issues, or even spiders or speaking in front of a group, staring at these things honestly robs them of their power. And to know that to daily identify and give thanks for the blessings from God, despite your situation, is the true way to a healthy life. This scripture today has deep spiritual and psychological significance. And wise counsel.

And in closing, it is interesting that in the Gospel lesson today, Jesus recalls this text we are looking at. He says, "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." Our own fears can be confronted but ultimately the healing comes from staring at Jesus on the pole—the lifted Jesus. And then Jesus was lifted even further and now walks with us every day. From that encounter we can enter into a wonderful daily thanksgiving for God's grace. If we live out of a life of thanksgiving, and not complaints and denial, those snakes would mostly leave us alone. Mostly, I say, because problems do keep coming—that is the human condition. But it makes life more manageable and brings us the Peace we all so sorely long for. I mean, where would you be if we were stuck in the problems that come with life if you did not have Jesus walking with you? Think about it; where would you be?

So our call today is to honestly acknowledge our fears—privately, or ideally with others,. Please trust that God does want us to be healed. But first, we are called to live out of gratitude, giving thanks for our daily bread, which we pray every week with the community of believers. Amen