

SNAKES
Matins homily
[written in oral form]

Numbers 21:4-9; John 3 14-21; Ephesians 2:1-10
Lent 4, year B

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The Numbers 21 text presents a unusual story that includes poisonous SNAKES, and in churches around the world today, preachers will declare, "I don't like snakes."

So, not to disappoint, I don't like snakes, ...well that is, poisonous snakes. And, I'm glad I don't live in the south.

The few trips that I backpacked in the South were Not only hot and humid, but they were filled with snake encounters. I was more accustom to hiking in the north woods / in bear country, so as I hiked, I would whistle and make lots of noise to warn the snakes that I was coming. That tactic didn't seem to work at all.

I was often surprised by snakes following me or ready to lunge by the side of the trail. A number of year later, I found out that snakes are pretty well deaf.

I did quickly learn that it is especially risky to hike in the cool of the evening.

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I don't like poisonous snakes! But, they are a part of life, and it's prudent to know how to respond to them.

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Maybe we can learn without experiencing first hand.
Maybe we can learn from the Israelites' encounter with poisonous snakes in the wilderness.

Following their emancipation from slavery in Egypt, they journeyed out into the wilderness. Wilderness is **that** UNCOMFORTABLE place, where things just don't go right,..... And all seems hostile and undesirable.

Wilderness is NOT the land of our dreams. It is not the land of milk and honey.

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In the Numbers 21 passage, the Israelites were on their way from bondage to the promised land, but had not yet arrived and had no idea how long it would take. They were out in the wilderness, and to make matters worse, they had to march around the people of Edom.

Image how they felt: contemplating the Edomites in their comfortable homes, while they had to March through the wilderness to go around them.

*It is ALWAYS hazardous to compare ourselves with others.*

*The assessment is usually detrimental to our spirit.*

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So, out marching through the wilderness they grew discontent, and quickly forget how terrible it was to be in bondage. All they could think about was their present hardships and suffering.

Sure, God had provided for them in the past, But in the midst of their ongoing difficulties and disappointments, it was hard for them to find comfort in those past blessings.

They were only focusing on the present, and the present was dismal. So they complained.
They complained to Moses, and to God, Yet their complaining wasn't just "Complaining." They were protesting against Moses and God.

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*There is nothing wrong with Complaining.*

Complaining can be a petition for improvement.

There is nothing wrong with Complaining to God.

Complaining to God can be a very valid sign of faith.... similar to a baby crying in the night.... beckoning a warm tender response.

There is nothing wrong with moaning, crying out and Complaining.

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Complaining is one thing, Disrespect and Losing Faith is another thing all together.

The Israelites screamed out “Against” Moses and God, and the protest sounded rather childish, too.

They shouted out “There’s Nothing to eat and drink, ..and the food is yucky!”

What a minute.** There’s “no food”, **but it tastes terrible???? Ummm.

Their problem wasn’t so much the presence or quality of their food and water, but rather something else. ???

For some reason, they were NOT trusting God. They did not share God’s vision. They only saw themselves.

Something was blocking their faith. ???

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Their protesting was a cry of **contention**. They did NOT want to continue the hardships in the wilderness.....even though God had provided all along.

Their protesting was CHOOSING another way, their way.

They were giving up on God.

Sure they still believed in God.....

***Believing in God is just a start.....A lot of people believe in God!***

Faith in God.... is much more than believing.

Faith requires the obedience of following AND a **total** personal investment.

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Something was blocking their faith.

So, they turned away in protest..... Away from God.

And, God heard them..... and **God withdrew**..... AND.... out came the snakes!

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They discovered in the Dark Wilderness .....SNAKES, Lethal, biting, nasty SNAKES. And, their snakes were killing them!

They were alone, in the wilderness with poisonous snakes!

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We have snakes in our lives. Sometimes we see them ... or... hear them or feel them. Sometimes they have bitten us, and if they haven’t yet..... it is only a matter of time.

More often than not we try to ignore them, and to do that we must keep them in the shadows (Out of the light), ... and Strange as it is, we end up in the darkness, too.

Hiding from our snakes ...keeps us in the darkness, too.

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That is why in the John passage, Jesus said people love the darkness. It is hard to see clearly in the darkness, little is exposed in the darkness, BUT

But..... Ignoring, concealing/ not seeing..... Does not eliminate the snakes, and it Does NOT keep the snakes from biting.

And they will bite. And, the poison takes away FAITH.

That poison can be lethal.

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Metaphorically, the snakes are what lurks in our dark places: our sins, our lusts, vices, our secrets, our shame, our regrets, .... and we all have them, and in time, unless they are exposed and dealt with..... they will take away our faith in God... They will take our life from us.

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Alone in the wilderness..... with Death abounding, The Israelites came to their senses, and cried out their repentance to God and begged Moses to ask God to take away the snakes.

Their cry for help was a faith statement to God.

But God DID NOT take away their snakes.

It just doesn't work that way. Consequences are that significant!

Instead God provided an antidote.

God told Moses to create a visual image, a bronze snake on a pole, and God said "whoever looks upon this image will live."

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*The snakes continued to bite..... but those who looked to the image that Moses made..... LIVED.*

*God's antidote.*

Interesting: they had to face, as if looking in a mirror, the very image of their torment.

In the light of day, with clear eyes, they had to face their demons!

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There is a lesson in this for us.

The way to life is **through** the darkness and beyond... into the light. It is through the wilderness....

Through the snakes... And through our fears, secrets and our shame.

We must face our demons.

We must contend with the snakes that bite us.

There are things that steal our joy and steal our faith, and those often blend with evil, and..... we can't hide them or hide from them.

They must be exposed. We have to examine them, confess them; they have to be brought out in the light,.... even while we are being bitten. because in the light..... we will also see and experience the redemptive activity of God.

God does liberate. God does save us. God does provide the way out, the way to life, and.... that way is through and beyond the snakes.

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And, understand that there was no magic in that bronze snake on a pole. The power was in the **faith** that God would bring healing.

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I can just imagine.... The perplexed Israelites, full of pain and fear, staring up at the bronze snake.... Wondering.... “what’s the point,” and Moses whispering to them, “Believe AND HAVE FAITH. Have faith, that was what God said would cure you..... so just have faith!”

Centuries later, Jesus compared the cross to Moses’ bronze snake.

Today, we have the symbol of the cross.

Just like the snake on a pole, there is no magic in the symbol of the cross.

Viewing a Cross will not save us. It is just a symbol

It is a symbol that can remind us of God’s love and the challenges that Jesus faced living that love, and how Christ lived beyond the crucifixion.

God will save us, if we believe that God will, yet knowing that won’t keep the snakes away.

If it did we would all live righteous lives,... never sinning.... And we’d never have regrets and those secret dark places in our lives.

Even those who believe in God..... sin..... and get bitten by their snakes.

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Believing is opening the door to God’s kingdom.

It takes **faith** to face our snakes and to walk through the door.

It is much like an alcoholics journey to deliverance. An alcoholic must first face and admit to being addicted, before he/she can move beyond the snake of alcohol.

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The salvation process includes exposure of our sins in the light, seeing God’s redemptive hand reaching out,..... and our spiritual hand reaching to God in faith.

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Paul said it better in Ephesians 2, a delightful passage full of giddy joy.

The theology is explicit and precise, BUT the mood is lyrical. The first nine verses of this passage in the Greek are all one sentence.

Paul piles one superlative onto another, one ecstasy onto another.

It’s all very “un-Lent-like”, but surely it is a note, a letter to the heart, we need to hear.

Verse 8, “For by Grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

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In our darkness, we hide.... because we are surrounded by our snakes.... we don’t want to see them.... and we definitely don’t want them to see us. Yet, they are there..... we sense them.... AND THEY SENSE US..... It is only a matter of time.

And then, by the Grace of God, a crack of light breaks into our darkness, With the message..... God will save you if you believe and have faith.
Believing opens our eyes,... But it is Faith that takes us to freedom!

But, we must NOT be fooled into thinking that it is something that we do. When we think it is our own doing,.... then snakes start appearing!!!
It is all the grace of God, received and understood through faith.

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Kierkegaard, The Danish philosopher, explained it this way:  
He said that if the average citizen in Christendom were asked to name the antonym of *sin*, he or she would invariably answer “virtue”. Once it is accepted that the opposite of sin is virtue, a person is off to a lifetime of keeping books with God.  
– *That was a Sin!* – mark it on the scoreboard. *Okay, this is an offsetting virtue, so we have a tie score.*

Another sin, then another virtue or act of kindness is needed.  
Perhaps a virtue first, putting that person “one up” with God.

It was Kierkegaard’s judgment that Christendom was peopled with works-righteousness members who never went beyond the bookkeeping stage with the Almighty.  
They had no concept of **gift or grace**.

Then came the shocker, Kierkegaard said, “when one turns to the Bible, he or she discovers that the antonym of “sin” IS NOT “VIRTUE” BUT..... “FAITH”.

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There is no possible way we can even up the score against our sins. Our hope for salvation is not to be found in what we can produce, but in what God has covenanted to give.

Titus says it this way – “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to God’s mercy, God saved us.”

The incredible and improbable good news is that God love us NOT because we are good, but because we are God’s children.

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All this pushes our rational assessment to the limit:

God delivered selfish, protesting Israelites.  
From Love, God sent us Jesus.  
God even cares about you and me.

All perplexing and a bit overwhelming.....

AND, THAT IS GRACE.....