

“Snakes on a Plain”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

March 14, 2021 – Fourth Sunday in Lent

Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

“Yuck! Yuck! Yuck!” cried out the wilderness-wandering Israelites as they dourly devoured their daily, divinely-delivered bread, consuming the manna that was lovingly provided for them by God throughout their sojourn in the desert. In our scripture reading from Numbers, we find the Israelites complaining to God and Moses about this “miserable” manna along with their other hardships.

This was hardly the first time that they whined about their food or predicament. Earlier in the book of Numbers, the people wept and cried out, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at” (Numbers 11:4-6). Somehow, they had forgotten that they were *enslaved* in Egypt, where their melon- and leek-gained strength was driven from their bodies through abusive forced labor for the Pharaoh. They had forgotten this bitter reality and rejected the graciously-given gift of God that descended nightly in the form of the manna that actually *gave* them life and *allowed* them to live and worship as a people in the wilderness, free from their former overlords and oppressors.

But time and again, the wandering Israelites overlooked their blessings and whined about their condition. In today's episode from Numbers 21, their lack of vision and gratitude brought punishment upon them in the form of God's provision of biting, fiery serpents. The Hebrew word describing these creatures, translated for us as "poisonous," is actually *seraphim*, which you may recognize from one of our great hymns, "Holy, Holy, Holy," which includes a line about how the seraphim, along with their heavenly pals, the cherubim, fall down before God. The hymn's image of the heavenly creatures bowing down before God comes from the Book of Isaiah, where the prophet has a vision of seraphim praising God in the temple. These seraphim were angelic, winged cobras, which often appear in ancient Egyptian and Syro-Phoenician art with wings outstretched to protect a deity that is behind them. In the case of the seraphim of today's story on the plains of the Sinai desert, the serpents are not defensively minded creatures, but offensive, flying snakes with a terribly potent bite. These flying snakes on a plain were a poisonous, punishing plague.

It was only through being bitten by these creatures, then suffering from their poison, that the people recognized the error of their whining ways and came apologizing to Moses, begging for him to pray to God to take the dreaded, fiery serpents away. Moses prayed, and God instructed him to give the people yet another serpent—this one of his own making, made of bronze and set upon a pole that the people might gaze

upon it and live whenever they found themselves bitten by the horrible, flying snakes of the Sinai and Negev.

Moses and that forgetful, complaining, snake-bitten generation of Israelites never made it out of the serpent-infested wilderness and into to the Land of Promise, but the snake that Moses fashioned on the pole did. It ended up being placed in the Temple that was later built in Jerusalem, and it was incorporated into the worship of Yahweh for centuries, apparently without violating the commandment for the people to neither make nor worship idols, that is, until good King Hezekiah of Judah determined that it was indeed a worshipped idol and had it destroyed.

Nonetheless, the symbol of the snake lifted on a pole to bring healing remained part of their culture, just as it remains with us today in our own symbols of medicine and medical care.

Moments ago, we heard from the Gospel of John that Jesus himself referred to the episode of Moses raising his bronze snake on the plain as an example of how he, too, would be lifted up, both at his execution and glorification, so as to bring medicine and healing not only to a nation wandering upon a desert plain, but to a whole world of serpent-bitten, poison-filled people.

This is good news for us today because we know that our world is still serpent-bitten, poison-filled, and hurting. And with our technologies allowing us the ability to constantly be aware of what is happening in places near and far, the pain that so many

experience is always before our eyes. Sometimes, the illness of the world seems so great that we wonder how there can be any healing or if there is any hope. The message of the cross is that God does offer hope for renewal. God continues to love the world and comes to the world through Christ, not to bring the poison of condemnation, but the healing medicine of forgiveness and a way of light and life for all the world's people.

God's medicine, though, like the ancient manna, is not always appreciated as it ought to be. We can get so caught up in seeing the pain of others, or suffering ourselves, that we lose sight of the abundant blessings provided to us by our loving, heavenly Creator. Instead of being aware of these blessings and being moved to share them by a life-enriching sense of gratitude, we too often complain about what we do *not* have, or what could be better, or what we feel is keeping us from having the perfect life. And instead of embracing the realities of God's blessings in the moment, we long for a return to the "the good old days," which are actually just a fantasy, as fictitious as the notion of the "good old days" of slavery were for the Israelites, when at least they could gorge on as much fish, leeks, and garlic as their enslaved hearts desired.

One way to combat the poison caused by our own delusion is for us to take greater efforts to keep our eyes open not only to that which hurts us and others throughout the world around us, but to the realities of God's blessing upon us and our world. This, however, is easier said than done, as complaining about

that which is not comes more easily to us than celebrating that which is. But the easy way, in this case, is certainly not the best way.

The best way is to follow the instruction we find in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, where he writes for them to "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-17). So let us be proactive, responding to our struggles by seeking and finding blessings in them and by actively seeking out reasons to be thankful, that we may continually offer prayers of thanksgiving. The more we seek out reasons to be thankful, and meditate upon these, the more we can rejoice as God has called us to do.

Maybe every morning you can come up with a list of five reasons to be thankful and then offer a prayer of thanksgiving. Perhaps before you eat a meal, you can pause to consider the many hands that have worked to enable to you to have and enjoy that meal. Maybe you commit to offer a word of thanks to another person each day through your speech or in a note or even an email or text message. However it is that you offer your thanksgiving, do so generously, and you will create better new days where others are blessed and you are blessed, and you will become more of the grateful person that God has called you to be. And the more thankful you become as a person, the more you'll be better able to share your manna with the hungry, your peace with the conflicted, and your

healing medicine with the poisoned and dying. The gospel—the good news—will not be just an old, old story given on a hill far away under an old rugged cross, but will be present and alive in the moment—this moment—and it will change the world. May we be marked by our gratitude this day and every day and so bring glory to the giver of all goodness. Amen.