

“When the Angels Aren’t So Cute”

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

March 10, 2024 - Fourth Sunday in Lent

[Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21](#)

It's too wet! It's too cold! The night was too short! There are certainly lots of things we could complain about this morning. And even if it weren't so soggy and chilly, and if we weren't so mercilessly robbed of an hour of sleep, we could still find plenty of other things to complain about.

Complaining is one of the things that we the people of this God-beloved planet do best as we have lots of practice, most of having used our very first breaths after birth to announce to the world that we are not so happy about what just happened, and all of us regularly expressing our displeasure with this or that from those first moments of our lives until at last we give up our breath and return our bodies to the earth.

Today's story from the book of Numbers provides just one of many examples from the Bible of our complaining ways. The story tells us that the people of Israel, sometime after they had been set free from slavery in the land of Egypt and were then being led by Moses through the wilderness, complained about their lot in life.

This was hardly the first time they complained about their situation. In fact, their complaining was constant from the moment they were saved from Pharaoh and his army by God's miraculous provision for them of a dry path through the Red Sea that led them away to freedom. On the other side of the Red Sea, they were in a desert land and in need of water, and they complained of thirst, so God provided them with water. They complained that they didn't have enough to eat, and so God sent them manna. Not satisfied with these life-sustaining provisions, they continued to complain that they weren't enough, that they also wanted meat to eat, so God sent them quails. Then they complained about these too! God provided for them on every step of their journey out of Egypt, and yet, instead of responding with thanksgiving and faithfulness, they complained about what God had given to sustain them, where God had led them, and who God provided to shepherd them.

The lesson from today provides us a record of their final complaint, with the people not just expressing their unhappiness with what God had given them, but actively speaking *against God* and *against Moses*. Having heard enough of the people's belly-aching and now-personal verbal attacks, God provided for them again, this time sending them fiery serpents, *serafim* in Hebrew.

Serafim in the Bible also refers to an angelic order of beings, *cherubim* being another, that do the work of guarding God's presence. We tend to imagine angelic beings looking and acting like the exceptionally cute angels of our Christmas pageants, with their tiny, fluffy wings and glittery tinsel halos, but there was nothing cute about these angelic creatures. In fact, quite the opposite is true. They were terrifying to behold. Appearing in a vision in the book of Isaiah as part of a heavenly court, *serafim* were human-like, six-winged creatures that flew above the heavenly throne, guarding it while singing a song, glorifying God with voices so thunderously loud, that everything shook. One of these *serafim* took a burning coal from the altar burning in God's presence and brought it to the prophet Isaiah in a symbolic gesture of purification of Isaiah and his words, preparing him for his work of declaring God's word to the people of Israel.

The text in Numbers says nothing about the *serafim* that were sent to the Israelites in the wilderness having wings, singing thunderously loud songs, or carrying a purifying fire, but they were fearsome in their own way, having a bite with fiery poison that caused many to die.

The snake-bit Israelites repented of their complaining ways, and instead of just complaining about this truly awful circumstance, used their voices instead to confess to Moses of their sin against God, who then mercifully and graciously provided once more for the people. God had Moses fashion a bronze serpent that was lifted up on a pole for all to look at whenever bitten and poisoned by the fiery serpents, and through looking at this symbol of God's provision, the snake-bitten people would still live.

In our gospel lesson from John, we read of Jesus referring to this episode of Israel's history, stating that just as Moses lifted the bronze snake for the people in the wilderness to see and live, he, the Son of God and Son of Man, a title for the longed-awaited, heavenly judge and ruler, would be lifted up for all the world's people to see that they might live. For God so loved all the world's people, Jesus

would be lifted for their sake, not only on a Roman cross, but even higher in a glorious ascension from the grave to the sky, to give life and light to all people.

This is the good and glorious news that we celebrate today as our journey through the season of Lent continues and we consider how our own foolish ways have led us to become snake-bitten and poisoned and in need of God's provision of life and light. For God so loved the whining, ungrateful, and faithless Israelites, God provided what they truly needed to sustain them on their difficult journey. And because God so loves all of us and is merciful and gracious to all of us, God provides a path for all of us that leads to light and life. Thanks be to God!

This life-ward path is Christ's way of selfless love, the way of providing for the snake-bitten, the way of seeing those who complain, perhaps even speaking against us, as fellow beloved children of God. May that way ever be our way. May we always seek to be less like the poisonous, serpentine seraphs, slithering in the dust and striking out in wrath, and more like the heavenly, soaring *serafim*, singing songs of praise and thanksgiving and doing the tasks that God gives us to do to help people to sense God's work of purification and healing in them.

As continue the journey we share on the path that leads us and others to more light and life, may God's abiding presence give us strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. Amen.