

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 11, 2018

"SNAKE BIT"
by Mary Anne Biggs

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

I have to admit that I watch some pretty weird TV. I especially love to watch the programs on Animal Planet. One of my favorites is called "My Cat From Hell." A great big guy with lots and lots of tattoos goes to people's homes to help them live peaceably with their, you guessed it, "cat from hell." I love this show because the cat wrangler is probably the sweetest, gentlest guy in the world, and because I always feel better about my cats after seeing some of them. Animal planet is chock full of incredible people doing incredible things with incredible animals.

On another program this man crisscrosses the United States in search of different varieties of rattlesnakes. I can't believe my eyes. He is crawling on his belly into rock crevasses with five or six snakes in them ... pulling ten-foot rattlers out by the tail ... jumping back every now and then to avoid their strikes ... and controlling them with a six-inch twig. "Look at this one!" he exclaims, his nose about a foot away from an angry female diamondback coiled and threatening: "Isn't she be-yoo-ti-ful! This is the greatest day of my life!" And then he turns to the camera and says, "Don't try this at home." Well, he doesn't need to worry about me!

Snakes have a reputation, the Animal Planet notwithstanding. Throughout the ages, they have been known as symbols of sneakiness, craftiness, hiddenness, evil, danger, and death. If you call someone a "snake," you probably aren't feeling too kindly towards them. I grew up in West Texas where the general rule was that if you were on your way to a fire ...and came across a snake ... you would stop to kill the snake.

The Hebrews remembered a story about what happened to them back in the days when they were wandering in the wilderness. They were grumbling again. They were recalling their days back in Egypt when they had all the food they could eat. Sometimes freedom is harder than slavery because you have to take responsibility for yourself. And the past always becomes "the good old days," no matter how terrible they actually were ... in comparison to the problems pressing us at the moment. "We're tired of manna," they whined. And we're tired of walking around in the desert. Sure, God delivered us from the hand of the Egyptians ... and gave us fresh water to drink and manna to eat ... but what has God done for us lately?" You know how some people are grateful for every little crumb of Providence ... while some folks whine at the least little bump in the road and blame God for not taking care of them in fine enough style? Put the Hebrews of the Exodus in category "B."

The Bible says that God, weary with their whining, sent poisonous snakes among them which bit the people, and many died. The moral of this story seems to be ... no matter how bad things are, they can always get worse. The people regretted their impudence against God and prayed for

deliverance. But God didn't take the snakes away. Instead, God had Moses make a snake on a stick so that when the people got bit, they needed only to look at this serpent on the stick. And then they wouldn't die. Curious story. The only way to healing is for them to face the very thing that's killing them.

Our gospel today tells us, *"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"* (John 3:14-15). The evangelist John says that the cross is like that serpent on a stick. It tells us what's wrong with us ... and heals us of it at the same time. Only in this case, it is not God who sends the snake to bite us. We do that ourselves. We run to those places where the snakes hide in the darkness, and we get bit. *"And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed"* (John 3:19-20). God doesn't have to judge us ... we judge ourselves. God doesn't have to punish us. The punishment is built in ... the natural consequence of our behavior.

We don't want to admit that John has nailed us on the head, but what he says is true. We're already on the outside looking in ... wondering if God knows us as we really are ... and we're sure that if the people around us knew the truth about us, that they wouldn't like us. We make excuses ... plead extenuating circumstances ... blame other people for our own mistakes and weaknesses. With serpentine logic, we convince ourselves that bad is good ... and dark is light ... and wrong is right. But the cross is inescapable. It says, "Look at this. This is who you are."

As Frederick Buechner says, "The gospel is bad news before it is good news." It is the news that we are all sinners ... that we have all fallen short of the glory of God ... that we all need saving ... every single one of us. I know that the church throughout its history has beaten us over the head with the "sin" word until we felt no grace at all ... always telling us we are sinners ... always trying to make us feel guilty ... always naming our shame. The church is wrong when it shames people into submission. But some of this old fashioned, Bible thumping, preoccupation with sin is an attempt to overcome our deep denial that we are sinners at all.

I am thinking of sin as anything that does damage to ourselves or others ... that breaks our relationship with one another or with God. And we've all done something along the way that throws us into this category. Because we've been spanked by the Bible belt so many times, we are tempted to throw away the concept of sin altogether and preach grace as a kind of no-fault insurance policy. Bad form. We dare not take sin glibly. Sin breaks God's heart. Sin makes God angry, as we feel angry with our children when they mess up. But we feel angry precisely because we love our kids and want them to prosper and be the best they can be. Where is the grace in a God who doesn't care if we do damage to ourselves or to each other? There is no grace without a passion for justice and righteousness and health. In the cross of Christ, guilt and grace are held together simultaneously.

Sin is ubiquitous, so we should never feel we are better than anybody else. Sin is known by its consequences, and we merely need to look honestly at our lives. Sin kills. Sin kills relationships. Sin kills community. Sin kills our best hopes and dreams. Sin kills our souls. But sin is specific ... we each have our own particular character flaws, shortcomings, and self-

destructive tendencies. Sin comes in many forms. Tradition listed seven categories: pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust. There are more modern names: arrogance, aggression, abuse, violence, hatred, racism, misogyny, homophobia, and so on.

We don't need to pretend that we don't struggle with our own particular shadow sides. But we do pretend. Like Adam and Eve hiding from God in the Garden of Eden after eating the forbidden fruit, we try to hide from God. Shame makes us hide from one another and even lie to ourselves. "There is nothing worse than self-deception," lamented Plato, "where the deceiver is always with you."

It's scary to be honest with ourselves about ourselves ... or to confess our sins even to someone we trust. What happens if we admit we have a problem, and then don't have the power to change? As Elaine Pagels observes, "*People would rather feel guilty than helpless.*" It feels risky to name our demons because they might step up and control us ... like the people in Harry Potter novels who are afraid to say the name of the evil Voldemort, lest they accidentally offend him or invoke his presence. But the truth is, it is the unnamed demons which drive us mad and ruin our lives. Consequently, the first step to healing is to name our demons ... to confess we are sick. You don't get treatment for snake bite until you admit you are snake bit.

And you know what they do with the venom they milk from all those vipers that they corral at those rattlesnake roundups that they hold every year in West Texas don't you? They make anti-venom from it. Do you hear the lesson in that? You are saved by transforming the very thing that kills you into the thing that saves you. Carl Jung suggested that we should not hide from our shadow side, but admit it, embrace it, and transform it. Stubbornness can be turned into determination. Anger can be turned into a passion for justice. Lust can be turned towards the capacity for mutual intimacy. There is hardly any character flaw that can't become a strength. Thomas Moore suggests that instead of only fighting rage we should listen to what our disease and negative feelings may show us about ourselves. They may be guides from God telling us what we are missing ... what we need to do ... where we need to go. In other words, we need to take our snakes by the tail and drag them from their dens. We need to see their beauty but avoid their bite so we can live with them in peace.

One way or another we cannot find healing until we are honest enough and authentic enough to admit we need it. As Leonard Cohen sings: "*There are cracks, cracks, in everything, that's how the light gets in.*" We are cracked and fractured and struggling to hold it together, but that's where the light gets in. That's where we meet God. Because just as we finally admit those places where we are out of control and our lives are unmanageable, we discover there is more than enough grace to heal us in the love of God. God loves all us cracked-up, snake-bit, darkness-loving sinners, and won't throw any of us away.

God doesn't want to condemn us like those preachers who used to give us a good old-fashioned Bible bashing. But God shows us what ails us so God can show us what saves us. There is no use in any of us denying it or hiding from it. We know this about each other, and certainly God knows it. And we don't have to be afraid to be honest about ourselves because God has the power to change us and tame our demons and turn our snakes into friends.

When I was working in prison ministry a woman spoke up during prayer time. We never ask why our “sisters-in-white” have been incarcerated, but she felt compelled to confess that she was an alcoholic. She confessed that she had jumped into her car one night to go get some more liquor when she struck a man on a motorcycle and killed him. She was so ashamed and scared, but here she was telling this group of pretty righteous straight laced Christian volunteers what she had done.

I have to admit that I was a little concerned that they might be too harsh, but that just goes to show how wrong I can be. Do you know what they did? They hugged her. They prayed for her. They loved her. They listened to her. She learned she was still a child of God and that nothing can ever separate her from the love of God in Christ Jesus. She and I also learned that there were two recovering alcoholics in our group of Christian volunteers. "I thought I was the only one," she told me later. The truth was, she was the only one who had the courage to first name her demon authentically and to confess it. It was a beautiful moment of courage, the way she trusted our group. It was a beautiful moment of healing, the way our group loved her.

The cross is not a word about God's angry judgment ... it's news about God's incomprehensible love. You don't have to be afraid that God is going to throw you away. You don't have to pretend you have no flaws, no problems, no struggles. We're all a bunch of cracked pots here. You need to stop fooling yourself that you've got it all under control. Instead, embrace your shadow side. Look honestly at yourself and see your snaky ways. And by the grace of Christ start the journey towards healing ... surrounded every moment by the God who loves you. Let the light shine through the cracked places of your life and erase the darkness where the snakes thrive. Then take the snake by the tail and toss it aside.

Therefore, I invite you: come to the cross of Christ and see your own darkness. Come to the cross of Christ and accept forgiveness. Come to the cross of Christ and be healed by the God who loves you just as you are. May we pray?

God, we are each of us sinners, and we need your help. We are all of us sinners, so we need not hide from each other. Give us the courage to be honest today, to accept the truth about who we are and get over it. Then, in the specific places where we struggle, may we transform our snakes into the very means of our healing through the power of the cross. Amen.