

Fourth Sunday in Lent
Refreshment Sunday; Mothering Sunday; Laetare/Rejoice
NUMBERS 21:4-9
PSALM 107:1-3, 17-22
EPHESIANS 2:1-10
JOHN 3:14-21
March 10, 2024

Snakes Alive!

Snakes! Perhaps no other animal elicits the kinds of spontaneously combustible reactions because of their surprise appearances more than these elusive and evasive reptiles, yes, wild beasts with amazing strike capability. These not-so-slippery creatures crawl on their bellies, their slick and stealthy movements, along with their quick bursts of speed, defying their legless lives! From that mythological moment in time, when the wily serpent beguiled the vulnerably compromised Eve with its intoxicating manner, human beings, for the most part, have been repulsed by the slithery creatures. Supposedly victimized by her second-class status as the weaker sex, sounding a lot like a meekly, shaky, voiced, some would say mealy-mouthed, Alabama female senator, Eve could not resist the intoxication of the irresistibly lusty temptation as the serpent recoiled in its most alluring dance.

“Beguile” is such a lovely, alluring, esoteric, King James image! And as if a precursor, call it a foretaste of not so much glory divine, we remember that Moses and Aaron both had staffs that would immediately morph into snakes as they threw them on the ground, the serpents devouring the magic snakes matched by Pharoah’s sorcerers, humiliating all his magicians, exposing their secret arts for all to see (Exodus 7:8-13). Snakes have served in a prominent role throughout history, appearing in artwork that dates to ancient societies. Nothing like “snakage” to get the senses moving! And just think about it, everyone has their favorite snake story. Mine are all good because I

love those cute little cuddly, scaly, creatures of reptilian desire, having kept them as pets on and off throughout my life. I actually enjoy handlin' nonvenomous snakes! And, after all, it is in the later added edition at the end of the Gospel of Mark that tells us that "taking up", handling, venom-laden serpents and drinking poisonous liquids is a sign of belief and faith (Mark 16:17-18). And the psalmist and the prophet Isaiah would declare that the child would play over the den of the asp (adder) [Psalm 119:24; Isaiah 11:8]. And think of the movies! Classics like "Snakes on a Plane" and "Anaconda!" And how about the ubiquitous symbol for medicine we are so accustomed to seeing, the "caduceus", as it is called, formally adopted by the United States Army in 1902 with two snakes coiled around a pole, intertwined in front of two wings, after having been informally displayed as a single snake on a staff as early as 1856. But the snake as a profound symbol has a much longer history, dating to the Greeks and Romans as early as 2612 BCE, a staff dedicated to Hermes and their God of healing, Asclepius, and even older versions tracing a legacy to India and Syria. And, of course, the first reported reference, appearing in the Jewish Tanakh during the Hebrew sojourn in the wilderness, recorded in Numbers in about 1400 BCE. As Dennis T. Olson observes, "The symbol of the snake or serpent played important roles in the religious and cultural life of ancient Egypt, Canaan, Mesopotamia, and Greece. The serpent was a symbol of evil power and chaos from the underworld as well as a symbol of fertility, life, and healing. The bronze serpent in Numbers 21 bears some relationship to a healing ritual known as sympathetic magic, common in the ancient Near East. If an individual suffered from the poison of some animal or plant, then gazing upon an image of that same poisonous animal or plant was thought to heal or guard the person from further attack. . ."¹ He adds that "the serpent is a potent symbol of both life and death," citing Karen Randolph Joines who describes *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament*. She says, "Antipathy and fear for the

¹Dennis T. Olson, "Numbers", in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), 136.

serpent have (equaled) respect for it. Its slender fangs can puncture the flesh of a strong man, and he is no more. Conversely, the serpent represented life. It glides from the earth—it is the living essence of the soil; it annually sloughs its old skin cells, an image of its former self—it represents recurring youthfulness; its penetrating eyes sparkle with unusual (luster)—it signifies superhuman wisdom. This is the serpent—a strange synthesis of life and death, an object of both intense animosity and reverence.” (Joines, p. vi).² Sounds more than vaguely familiar as we read this story today. Yes, these comments bring us to our exciting snake infested lection for today. Might make your skin crawl!

This story from the book of Numbers offers a glimpse into one of the numerous biblical stories from the Hebrew Bible describing the adventures of the children of Israel, yes, the ancient escapades of the Israelite people. Once called the Hebrews, this special people endured and enjoyed a wide range of emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual experiences in their desert travels, the ups and downs of their travails, trials, and testing, as they made their way as they tabernacled toward the land they believed that God had promised them as part of their chosen status. The book of Numbers has a long, complicated, and storied history, the final edition as we now have it, perhaps, probably, due to a Priestly redaction, the careful editing of a Yahwistic source, the two traditions coming together as one unit in the narrative we find in the Hebrew Bible. The story begins at Mt. Sinai, the place where Moses and the people received the ten commandments. We now find this seemingly misplaced people somewhere in the wilderness, having endured much hardship along the way, their journey a seemingly endless sojourn with nary an end in sight. A surface reading of the text reveals that this was a people at the end of their proverbial rope, their frustration palpable as they wondered to themselves and

²Ibid., 137.

openly to one another, “how long O Lord?” In response to their perceived plight, they began to do a very normal, a very human thing, griping and complaining, whining to their frustrated and limited leader, Moses their liberator, about the challenging conditions, the dire circumstances, they encountered with every passing day, survival necessities often lacking if not totally absent. **Their biggest complaint, complaint number one, was the very thing that always triggers negative feedback, the lack of food and water, the essentials for maintaining life, the most basic needs for survival.** The Yahwist compiler says that they spoke against Moses, and, of course, they spoke against God, the Divine always an easy target, but according to the biblical narrative in the Hebrew Bible never a wise thing to do back in the day. Never can I preach this text without full disclosure, or as Paul Harvey used to say, the rest of the story, taking us back a few chapters that lead to the events we read today. For already in this saga from Numbers (11:5) we find the same kind of grumbling. Like a good Sit Com or a Soap Opera, we can almost hear an announcer in the background saying for the audience, “previously on As the Hebrews Turn or All My Hebrews. . .” This round of unhappiness was the same old tune, same song, second verse, a whole lot louder, but perhaps not a whole lot worse! You see, just a mere ten short chapters ago, way back in chapter eleven, we read where the people complained because of the limited menu, one item only, manna, and this divinely apportioned ration no longer tickling the fancy of their most discriminatingly picky palate, their complaining incensing their caring and compassionate, their most generous, God to the point that God fired a warning shot, sending fire to the edge of the encampment but, with some intervention from Moses, did not smite them on the spot, burning them all to a crisp. But alas, they were not finished! The Yahwist tells the reader that no sooner had they been spared the fiery flames of an angry and wrathful God, but “the rabble among them had a strong craving! And the Israelites also wept again, and said, ‘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.’” **Ah, the good old days in Egypt! Bondage! Slavery! The indentured life! Ah, evidently bright Egypt’s fair and happy land was a lush oasis for these sordidly contemplative, reflective, wistful thinkers, the land of the pyramids a cornucopia of goodness, an Old Testament version of Camelot, yes, salad days, glory days, the best days now well behind us, far back as their minds would take them in the rearview mirror, days of wine and roses. Oh, the satisfyingly wonderful things we left behind! And just look at us now! Starving, dying of thirst, miserable in this unrelenting heat! The introspection of these malcontents went no further than meeting their immediate needs, a failure to look beyond their inflamed senses, especially their taste buds. And that Pharoah, what a great guy! So kind and generous! So gracious and merciful! Dude just gives and gives and gives, gives until it hurts! We miss him so! As the song from “All in the Family” sang, those were the days, we had it made! And look at us now! Manna here, manna there, manna, manna, everywhere! We are so sick of this manna! God, can you not make something else, something different? This deity is the worst cook!** Well, Moses heard all the griping and became very angry, taking out his frustration on God, turning his vitriolic attention on the One who had the audacity to hatch this far-flung failure of a plan, deigning to deliver this fickle and unappreciative, ungrateful, people from what they might deem a new form of bondage. “Why have you treated your servant to badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,’ to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at

once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.” (Numbers 11:11-15). Nobody likes me! Everybody hates me! I’m going to eat some worms! **And the funny part of the story is that while the Lord refuses them a smorgasbord, the Lord caved to their demands, dutifully, as if on command, sending them an all you can eat buffet of quail, the daily special, quail, every day, telling them, “You shall not eat only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days”—sounds like one of my never-ending sermons—“but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you”—shall we say like the manna—“because you have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have wailed before God, saying, ‘Why did we ever leave Egypt?’” (Numbers 11:19-20). Yes, you will eat your fill until you get sick and tired of it, grouching about all this bird! Grouching! Pun intended! As Dennis T. Olson comments, “The people drag out the same old laundry list of complaints about dying in the wilderness, yearning to go back to Egypt, the lack of food and water, and the monotony of manna.” What a cry me a river litany! Like Linda Ronstadt’s song, “Poor, poor, pitiful me, poor, poor pitiful me!” And that brings us full circle to what we read today, the people still whining and complaining, griping and grumbling, about the accommodations, not having learned a lesson in the least.**

But this time God meant business and got down to business! Rather than sending fire and brimstone old school style, yes, some old time religion, ala Sodom and Gomorrah, the Holy One incinerated the petulant travelers, consuming them in a fiery billowing ball, smoldering like the remnants of a bad dumpster fire, this time God followed through with another, a different, threatening promise, going postal. One call, that’s all! This time God sent snakes, a huge den of deadly vipers! God sent more serpents than you would find at a flourishing Florida reptile farm, what we southerners amusingly used to call a Yankee rest stop, a tourist trap on steroids, always thrilling the locals while padding their pockets. Politically incorrect

indeed! And the writer, recalling the earlier pyrotechnic threat, makes a beautiful play on words that gets lost in the translation, God sending poisonous snakes, the literal translation being “fiery” snakes, a euphemism for the burning sensation that a snakebite causes when its venom is unleashed, inflicted and injected, on human skin, as Olson notes, “an apt metaphor for the fiery anger of God.” **Once again Moses came to the rescue, as he often was forced to do as an oft unwillingly reticent, involuntary, mediator, intervening on behalf of the petrified, traumatized and terrorized, people, praying to God that the Holy One, that this angry and wrathful deity would reconsider, repent, and deliver this people from this torturous death sentence.** And once again God acquiesces to what would have been an unfortunate end, this divine reign of terror perversely noted as a final and ultimate solution to all the bickering? Yikes! Perish the thought! **Fighting fire with fire, pun intended, God instructed Moses to make a statuesque bronze snake and put it high on a pole for all to see. Whenever anyone got bitten, whenever the dreadfully deadly snake would strike, all they had to do was gaze upon the symbolic serpent on a staff, facing the very thing they feared, and they would live.** Divine kryptonite! Bite me! I have always wanted to say that in a sermon! Serpentine serenity! Interestingly enough, thousands of years later modern scientists would discover the ability to make antivenoms derived from the very poison of the species of snake that had bitten its unsuspecting victim. Somewhat ironic, I think! Sadly, eventually the snake on a stick would become an idol for this people’s ancestors, yes, just like the infamously idolatrous golden calf they once used as a poor substitute, worshipping that hastily crafted beast of gold, the poorest substitute, a pitiful and pathetic replacement for Yahweh their God when they got antsy, impatient, and doubtful when Moses tarried on the mountain. You cannot make a facsimile of Spirit! They would name it Nehushtan, which not so ironically was derived from a wordplay, a frequent medium employed in the Hebrew Bible, using the Hebrew words “*nehash*” and “*nehoshet*”, meaning “serpent” and “bronze”, the closely

related terms obvious to the original reader. Eventually, King Hezekiah, in his efforts to reform Judah's worship, would tear down and destroy any remnant of Hehushtan, the remotest vestige of what must have become a demonic image because Nehushtan, once a symbol for good and not evil, had taken on the worst connotations, devolving into an idolatrous image, profanely taking up residence in the temple (see II Kings 18:4), assuming that this snake on a stick was the same one invoked by Moses back in the day.

Aside from being a captivating story, there is much to tell in this tale of legendary proportions, no doubt these recollections an embellishment, an exaggeration, of a real, a historical, episode purported to have occurred in the tabernacling life of the Israelites when they indeed, unfortunately, found themselves directly camped over a den of snakes, surrounded by a plethora of the mythical serpents of biblical lore. Perhaps the biggest takeaway is the reminder to all of us, just as it should have been back in the day, once upon a time, of just how blessed we truly are in this one life we are granted, gifted to us in so many ways. In the words of the old Gospel Song, this text encourages us to count our blessings, naming them one by one. Yes, there is much mythology in the different versions of the wilderness journeys of the Israelites as they reportedly fled from bondage and made their way to the land of Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey they believed would be their possession by an ancient version of imminent domain, yes, by divine right, anointed as a manifest destiny that was surely their destiny, their final destination a utopian homeland of much promise. No, good deed goes unpunished, and Moses was often their scapegoat, along with Yahweh their God, the one they had, ironically, intimately, personally, come to know by name, Moses and the Holy One convenient targets of their restless dependents, all of them boiling-over with fear and anxiety when things suddenly did not go their way and seemed so dire. **Their tribulations shaking their foundations were literally art imitating life and vice versa, reminders**

that this life is full of challenges and difficulty, yes, hardships, even failures, but that the very gift of life is a blessed gift in and of itself. And yes, in our worst human moments, the circumstances and situations that test our mettle, sometimes truly beyond capacity, it is hard, very hard, to see the wonderful forest for the disastrous trees. Life is about the journey and not the destination, something the Israelites often failed to remember in their haste to get to where they were going. This Lenten season, with all its contemplative, reflective, disciplines, the introspection that these forty days demands of each and every one of us, is a stark reminder that we indeed live day by day, day to day, and that sometimes we simply must stop, cease and desist, from our frantic activity, and take stock of all that is and all that is around us. Yes, we must, at least as we are able on occasion, to be still and know! Yes, it is cliché, and I am really not into cliché religion, but the adage is true, so very true, for all of us, that we find ways to stop and smell the proverbial roses, and appreciate, give thanks, offering much gratitude, for the unique journey we have been given, the precious life we have been granted. Yes, roses have thorns! Life is full of deserts and oases, gardens and wilderness, thin places and thick darkness, home and exile, bane and blessing. The glass is either half full or half empty based on our perspective! Manna is manna, good and bad according to our viewpoint! Snakes are venomous and nonvenomous! We learn the difference and we roll with the punches!

In the Gospel of John that we read today, the writer gives cause for Jesus to invoke this ancient snake story from the book of Numbers and to compare himself to that ancient caduceus symbol, yes, perhaps bizarrely, strangely, describing himself as a snake, a serpent, coiled around a pole as if ready to strike. The early Church, perhaps hijacking and misappropriating this story to suit their emerging pedestrian transactional theology of saved and lost, lost and found, salvation rooted in Paul's quid pro quo assertion that Jesus died for our sins, an

eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, transposed this story into a metaphor for Jesus the crucified, dying on a cross in our place, nailed to the tree because of our bad behavior, our sin. It is a story rooted in Substitutionary Atonement, a doctrine that makes God look like a monster, a child abuser who needed to be appeased, who needed retribution, what John Dominic Crossan calls “retributive justice,” vengeance being mine says the Lord. For many of us those horrific images no longer suffice because they are conveniently associated with a God who would embrace and approve child sacrifice, theologically dressed up as a biblical lamb in the Gospel of John, complete with all the blood and gore those images contain no matter our interpretive understanding. These simplistic biblical notions, these ideas postulated by the early Church, just no longer work for many postmodern, progressive, intellectually curious, critically thinking Christian minds. Sacrificial, yes, sacramental, living is not about taking a life, killing something, but is revealed in how we then shall live, how we live our lives in commitment, in dedication and obedience, to the socially just ways of Jesus!

So here is what I see when I look at the cross, yes, including the corpus, the lifeless body of Jesus, miserably hanging upon it, life and death no longer hanging in the balance. What I see is sacrificial love, not by an angry, vengeful, wrathful God, but gracious love poured out by a real human being who was so loving, “loving wastefully” as the late John Shelby Spong would say. Jesus controlled his narrative right up until the very end when he breathed his last, in charge of the way this sick drama would unfold. The rabbi was willing to die for his cause, a just cause, a righteous cause, as Spong would also say, more alive at his death than those around him, more alive than the life that most of us are ever privileged to experience in our lives. What I see is someone longing to inspire humanity to give generously of themselves, beyond themselves, beyond capacity, giving out of their unlimited abundance, and offer the unlimited varieties and

opportunities for giving cups of cold water, all of which are life-giving, feeding the spirit and the soul. It is these gifts of grace that are ours to give, ours to share, that increase one-hundred fold our human potential, maximizing our human being and doing, making the world a better place by emboldening, empowering, others and all of us who walk its precious pathways by walking in the footsteps of Jesus, each one of our footprints laced with love and gratitude. What I see is that saving our souls is not about keeping us from entering the do-not-enter gates of hell, cast into the lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels, or even fulfilling a bright future beyond this worldly journey including a ticket to eternity in heaven complete with the promises of pearly gates leading to streets paved with gold, but a reminder that we have much to do in the here and now, not so much heavenly minded as doing earthly good, as we preach and teach the gospel according to Jesus, fulfilling his mission and ministry right here on planet earth. We are at our best when we give of ourselves, when we answer the sacred call of Christ. What I see is, indeed, the antivenom combatting, destroying, every form of hate, prejudice and suspicion, exclusion and inhospitality, none of which need be named this morning because we know the drill and know it all too well. What I see is one who calls one and all to a better way, to become the lovingly gracious, merciful and peaceful, followers of the way, the way of the rabbi named Jesus, the man from Nazareth. We are compelled to be the folks who are never satisfied as long as there is anyone who has need, who goes without, who is lacking in whatever, in anything, that would keep them from being made whole. That is my take on a beautifully bizarre biblical story, and I am sticking to it.

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, is indeed saving us each and every day we have breath with every act of random kindness and mercy we deliver! Amen and amen!

