

Lent 4, Year B – March 14, 2021 Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21
Epiphany, Winnipeg Paul Sartison

I guess that story from Numbers is an obvious kind of story for Lent, when we talk about repentance and turning around and confessing and changing....

Just to recap: The people were complaining again. They'd been slaves for generations, and then they were miraculously and terrifyingly set free from slavery by an angel of death and by the drying up of a path through the sea. Once they were free they complained about being hungry, and God gave them food. They complained about being thirsty and God made water flow for them from a rock. They won a great military battle with God's help and then they complained about the food again, and they said right out loud that it might be better to be back in Egypt and be slaves again...because it's always better back there, right? Once you've forgotten that it wasn't? So God had enough and sent poisonous snakes and many people died, and when they finally came to their senses and realized what a mess they had made for themselves, they confessed and said, "We have sinned. Please make the snakes go away."

It's an obvious kind of story for Lent because we're called again now to be honest about what we've gotten ourselves into and the harms that we've caused. So we began this season with an Ash Wednesday liturgy filled with confession, and we began this service today with confession again: "We have sinned, and it's been our own fault." Then we maybe even joined our voices with the people of Israel who wandered in the wilderness and we've said with them, "We have sinned. We confess. Now please take away the snakes."

And here's what's strange in that story we heard; it's what's strange in our own story too: God doesn't take away the snakes. God just says, "Make your own snake. Put it on a pole. Look at it and you'll live."

Yes, it's kind of a strange story with a strange ending, isn't it? But the strange and difficult thing for us is simply this: God doesn't take away the snakes. I confessed, and I meant it. I know deep inside that I've hurt my neighbour with my words or by something I've done, and God will forgive me, but God doesn't suddenly let me off the hook and wipe away the hurt that I've caused so that I don't need to make it right. God doesn't just take away the snakes. We may confess and be honest and really really mean it if we say we've polluted the land and the sea and the air. And God forgives again...but the world doesn't become pristine again. Whatever we confess, we still need to clean up our mess, we still need to make right what we've made wrong, if I've hurt you I still need to make it right even if I've been forgiven, and we still need to try to change so we don't make the mess again.

That's the thing. God doesn't take away the snakes. We are forgiven and free and it's a new day and a fresh start, but we still have to live with the snakes, we're not off the hook for the messes we've made. We still work to heal the hurt that's been done and make it so it doesn't happen again.

God doesn't take away the snakes, but maybe the point is something like this: In the wilderness God makes the promise that the snakes won't kill you. You'll live. The snakes won't kill you; the wilderness won't be the end of the story, you will live...we will live. The messes we've made are not stronger than the life that God gives.

We have to be careful, of course, with talking about confession and snakes this way. We can't just say that we do something bad and God sends snakes or something worse to punish us. It's never that simple. And then to say that we're somehow responsible for the messes we make doesn't mean that a woman is

responsible for the abuse she experienced, or that it's my neighbour's fault that they're poor, or that you have that addiction because you just have a weak will. The mess we've made and the snakes we live with are just the ways that this world has been broken. Sometimes we do the breaking, sometimes we are the ones who are broken. There are these snakes, this wilderness. And in the wilderness God makes the promise that the snakes won't kill you.

Jesus picks up the story of the snakes in the wilderness years later when he's having a conversation with his friend Nicodemus. They're talking under the cover of night because Nicodemus doesn't want anyone to see that he's talking to Jesus. They talk about things like this weird idea Jesus has about being born again, not in any kind of literal way but in this way that God makes things new and makes life and makes fresh starts and might even raise up life from death. And as they talk Jesus brings up this same story that we heard from Numbers, and he talks about the Son of Man, or as some say, this human one, who comes from God and who will be lifted up on a tree, just like that snake was lifted up in the wilderness with the promise that the snakes and the wilderness will not be the end of the story. And you somehow can't help but think that Jesus is talking about himself there; being raised up on a tree so that the world will live.

And then he says, "God loved the world this way: by sending the Son into the world, even to die, so that everyone who looks at the one on the tree will live." And that's the thing, you know, that's so hard to understand sometimes, and we've come up with all kinds of ways to try to talk about how it works, and we've tried to make this whole thing about Jesus being crucified or raised up on a tree make some kind of easy sense or fit into some kind of a system. But Jesus doesn't do that.

He just says again, “God loved the world like this: by sending the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but to save it.” God loved the world like this: not by getting rid of the snakes, and not by taking away the troubles with a snap of the fingers, but by making a promise and by entering into the world with the snakes and the wilderness and the hurts that we cause and the hurts that we suffer. God loved the world by being born right into it, like we are all born right into it, and living in it like we live in it, and dying from it like we will all die from it. And rising again and saying to us, “The snakes won’t kill you. The wilderness won’t kill you. Look at me. I’m right here among you. You’ll live.”

That’s how God loves the world: By walking in the wilderness among the snakes and the troubles while a chosen people wander, sometimes lost, sometimes found. That’s how God loves the world: by walking in the wilderness among us and the snakes and the troubles and the joys and the gifts and the living and the dying, when we are lost, when we are found. That’s how God loves the world...just by walking in among us...with a promise that we will live.
AMEN.