

The Promise in the Wilderness

(Lent 4)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
Settle our hearts.
Still our minds.
And stir our imaginations,
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the souls of the people became very discouraged on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread." So YAHWEH sent among the people fiery serpents, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against YAHWEH and against you; pray to YAHWEH to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And YAHWEH said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

The Promise in the Wilderness

There is a lot that is strange about our scripture reading this morning. It is only six verses long, but by the second verse we already have a problem. At this point in the biblical narrative, the Israelites are nearing the end of their Exodus journey out of Egypt and toward the Promised Land; indeed, our text for this morning is the last in a series of stories often referred to as the murmuring stories—stories in which the Israelite people complain about God or Moses and the poor living conditions that they are experiencing in the wilderness. Early stories in this series feature the Israelites complaining because they have no food or the water is undrinkable—reasonable complaints that God promptly addresses by providing food and water aplenty.

But in this final murmuring story, it is hard to get past the second verse without realizing that the people's complaints have taken a turn: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt just to die in the wilderness?" they complain. "There is no food and no water! And also, we hate this bread!" Honestly, it sounds like my children when they come home from school and complain about there being no food in the house and why did we buy this kind of chips anyway—they hate those chips! It is a complaint that is both absurd and annoying. So perhaps it is

understandable that God's response is not an immediate influx of gourmet goods—after all, God has already provided the Israelites not only with daily manna but with quail as well. The people are far from starving.

But, there's a difference between not indulging or rewarding whining and sending in venomous serpents to indiscriminately kill people. (I suspect it is stories like this that cause people to think the God we encounter in the Old Testament is somehow different from the God we meet in Christ, but I digress.) God's response to the Israelite's murmuring seems so out of proportion that there are no shortage of theories that attempt to explain it (and one could, if one was so inclined, spent a pleasant afternoon falling down the rabbit hole of explanations, not that I would know ...). This morning, however, I want highlight two of the many explanations.

The first comes from the Jewish Talmud and Midrash. According to the Jewish rabbis of old, the serpent was the first creature to slander God by tempting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. So, it is only fitting, the decided, that it should be serpents who punish the Israelites, who clearly did not learn from the punishment of the serpent and thus continue to blaspheme their Creator. Plus, the rabbis wrote, there is something ironically fitting about God sending serpents, who eat dust without complaint, to punish the people who complain about food.¹ As a website for children's sermons puts it, God sent snakes because the people were being snakey!²

This interpretation makes some sense if we're looking for an explanation of how the punishment fits the crime, but it doesn't address why God would do such a thing. Even if the punishment fits the crime, the God we know through Christ (the God we encounter in the story of Noah!) isn't a God who responds with violence.

Which brings me to the second way of reading this text, which is to read it not as an historical record, but as a story. The book of Numbers is composed of stories and census lists, laws and battle reports, poetry and blessings that were pulled from a wide variety of sources and likely edited into its final form in the 5th century BCE when the people of Israel were in exile. The purpose of Numbers was never to record historical data, it was to be an interpretation—a working out of who God is and how God interacts with the world. And, in the world of ancient Israel, God was responsible for everything—the good and the bad. This was particularly true for the original audience of Numbers—an exiled and traumatized people who had lost everything they knew; a people for whom it was easier to believe that the bad things that were happening to them were a punishment from God than it was to believe that sometimes bad things just happen. Because, if the serpents are a punishment from God, then the people can change their behavior and God will remove the serpents.

But notice what the text does—it subverts this interpretation. The text says that God sends the serpents, likely because that is what the people would have believed, but two verses later,

¹ Ginzberg, Louis, *The Legends of the Jews* v.3, trans. Paul Radin
<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2881/pg2881-images.html#chap88>

² <https://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.com/2015/02/year-b-fourth-sunday-in-lent-march-15.html>

when the people repent and change their ways so that God will change God's ways, God doesn't remove the serpents. Instead, God takes the serpent and transforms it into something that can heal the people who are bitten.

So perhaps God didn't send the serpents; perhaps serpents are just part and parcel of life in the wilderness. Maybe this idea that God sent serpents to punish the people was just the only way an exiled and traumatized people knew how to make sense of what was happening. Maybe, when the people turned to God, God's response wasn't to remove the punishment because God never sent the serpents as punishment. Instead, God's response is to take the serpent, this agent of death, and transform it into something that can heal, that something that can bring about new life.

The promise that the Israelites encounter in the desert is not that we'll never encounter serpents, not even that we'll never be bitten by them, but it is that no matter what we encounter in our lives, God has the ability to transform what might otherwise cause death into something that can bring about new life.

Earlier this week a member came into my office and said, "let's talk about this idea that everything happens for a reason." [It's in moments like this that my call to be a pastor is perhaps most evident as I responded with an overly enthusiastic, "yes, let's!"] It's such a comforting idea, this belief that everything happens for a reason. It is a balm that can smooth over the rough patches in life. When things don't go the way we hope, when we don't get the job or the promotion, when property taxes price us out of our home and force us to move, when we experience a set back or a disappointment, this belief that everything happens for a reason helps us to look to the future, to focus on silver linings in moments when we might otherwise be tempted to give in to despair. If everything happens for a reason, then whatever bad thing has happened is not the end for us. If everything happens for a reason, then the set-backs and disappointments in life are part of a larger plan, part of God's plan; and that is comforting, even if, especially if, we can't understand the reason now.

But when things start really go wrong—when someone dies before they should, when a child is abused, when we encounter needless suffering—this belief that everything happens for a reason begins to unravel. It begins to unravel because it implies, at the very least, that God has allowed for someone to suffer, and at worst, that God has caused suffering. It means that God is willing to forsake particular individuals for the sake of a larger plan. It's a different iteration of what the Israelites believed, and it fails for the same reason ... because the God we encounter in the Bible, the God we know in Jesus, isn't a God who causes suffering or responds with violence.

Instead, the God we encounter in the Bible, the God we know in Christ, is a God who can take the suffering we experience, the heartbreaks and devastations that life sometimes hands us, and transform them into sources of new life. God isn't the cause of our suffering and pain, God doesn't send serpents to punish, serpents are just part and parcel of life in the wilderness,

and suffering and pain are just part and parcel of life on earth, but God can not only sit with us in our suffering, God can ultimately take and use it to bring about new life. It doesn't undo the heartache, doesn't justify suffering, doesn't explain why bad things happen, but it can provide for life in the midst of death.

The promise the Israelites encounter in the wilderness is the same promise we'll encounter in a few short weeks, when we gather around the cross, the most heinous and barbaric means of capital punishment, and watch God transform it into a symbol of life and hope.

Thanks be to God! Amen.