

B Lent 4 3.10.24

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

Focus Statement: God loves us.

Before we get to the Gospel reading, let's talk about snakes, shall we. Because the Old Testament text is, let's just say it like it is, weird and uncomfortable. Here's the story, the Israelites were in the middle of their forty years of wandering in the wilderness after escaping Egypt. Along the way, if you remember for the summer, they had battles with other tribes, struggled with trusting God, and complained—a lot—about the quantity and variety of food. This is one of those stories. Right before this one, they faced a major threat from the Canaanites. They prayed to God for help, and God helped them win the battle. So they left there, safe again, for a time, and, the text tells us, "set out by the way to the Red Sea...but the people became impatient." And, as they so often did when impatient, they turned on God and Moses. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt—where, if you recall, things were not great—to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Which, can we point out, if they detest the food, then there is food, they just don't like it. No food and not liking the food are not the same problem. But anyway, here's where the text gets hard. Because in response to their complaining, the text tells us that "the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died." Yeah, you heard that right. The text tells us that in response to the Israelites complaining, God sent poisonous snakes to bite people. And when they cried to God to take the snakes away, instead God had Moses put a snake on a pole, so that they could look at the pole, after being bitten by a snake, and live. This does not strike me as the greatest solution. I appreciate the not dying part, but I'd rather there just not be snakes in the first place. What do we do with this weird, hard text?

First off, we acknowledge that this is a weird, hard text, and that that fact in and of itself is gift. Because these weird texts force us to struggle with our faith and our understanding of God. They remind us that God acts in ways we cannot always understand, and they make us consider how our actions impact both God and other people. Wrestling with texts like this help us grow, and there is no better time for growth than Lent. As I was wrestling with the hardness of this text this week, here's a thought I kind of landed on. And this is the Gospel according to Pastor Kjersten here, so take this with a grain of thought, but here's what I came up with. We tend to read bible texts as prescriptive, as telling us how things will happen. If we complain, God will send snakes and won't ever take those snakes away, so don't complain, or else... But what if this text, what if a lot of bible texts, are not prescriptive but descriptive. What if instead of telling us what will happen, they simply describe how things are. What I mean by that is, what if there just are snakes, metaphorical snakes, let's not pick on actual snakes, they're one of God's creatures, but what if there just are poisonous snakes in the world, and they slither and bite. Snakes like prejudice, social injustice, diseases, broken relationships, violence, I could go on. There are so many things that cause pain and suffering. Sometimes the suffering is caused by our own sin, sometimes by someone else's, and sometimes it just happens, there is no one to blame. Maybe this is less a story about punishment, and more a story about a God who finds a way to bring life despite the continued existence of suffering. Poisonous snakes are here, this text says, and they are real, and they cause damage, and God is here too. Maybe this story is a promise that, as much as we'd like for God to just end all the sources of suffering, that's not what happens. But God does give us a promise of life throughout.

So let's table the snakes for a moment, and jump back to the Gospel. We're once again dropping in the middle of a conversation, so here's what's happening. Jesus spoke these words to Nicodemus the Pharisee. Nicodemus, to introduce him a bit, is a great character, because Nicodemus paints for us different ways of becoming a disciple. We've heard the story of Peter, Andrew, James, and John, whom Jesus called, "Follow me," and they immediately left everything behind, their nets, their boat, their father sitting in the boat, to follow Jesus. That is not Nicodemus's story. He took time. We see glimpses of him throughout John's Gospel. First here, where he came to see Jesus under the cover of darkness, so that none of his other Pharisee buddies would see him, to ask Jesus questions about the Kingdom of God. He'll pop up again in chapter seven, where he'll offer a pretty weak defense of Jesus in the council of the Pharisees, a step closer to faith but still pretty timid. And finally, at the very end, when all Jesus' other followers have fled, Nicodemus will come with Joseph of Arimathea to claim the body of Jesus from Pilate and make sure he has a proper burial. That is the three-year arc of Nic's faith, curious skulking in the dark to half-hearted defense to being one of the last people standing by Jesus' side after his death. We see in Nicodemus' story that faith does not have to be the instantaneous on-board of the disciples. It can take time.

But that's for later. Here, he's still skulking in the dark curious, when Jesus hits him with these complex and powerful words: "And 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." It's the snake story. Which, as a Pharisee, Nicodemus definitely knew. Knew and likely struggled with as much as we did at the start of this sermon because, as was

discussed, it's a weird story. So now Jesus was like, remember that other story you struggled with, this is like that. Still snakes, but also a way to life.

And this phrase "eternal life" is an important one because the Greek words refer to a life defined not by humanity but by God. Eternal life isn't endless life, like we'll live forever, more it is a promise of life lived in the unending presence of God. Which means eternal life is not some future promise. I mean, it is a future promise, but that's not all it is. It is both a future promise and our present reality. Right now, and in the future but also right now, we live in the unending presence of God.

So Jesus goes on, with that famous verse, "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." We've heard this verse a million times, but here's something new I learned about this verse this week. John 3:16 is the only place in the Gospel where God is described as "giving" Jesus. Normally, Jesus is described as having been sent by God. See the next verse, John 3:17, "For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." But in verse sixteen, which starts with a statement about God's love, we see the response to that love is the gift of Jesus. The incarnation, the Word becoming flesh, Emmanuel, God-with-us, that comes out of God's love for us. Sending Jesus, that the world might be saved, is God's will for the world, because first God loves the world.

And that word “world,” that’s an interesting one too. World here is the Greek kosmos, which in John’s Gospel is normally used in reference to the humans that were at odds with Jesus. Think about the Prologue just a couple chapters before, “he came into the world...and the world did not know him.” Here Jesus declares that world, those people, who oppose, are exactly the people for whom he came, to whom he was gifted by God, because of God’s incredible love for the world.

I was reflecting on this order the other day, God gave Jesus because of love, sending him to bring about God’s will for the world to be saved. Love first, salvation as an outpouring of that love. And something struck me, something that was not intentional on my part, but looks like we kind of nailed it. Think about our core values. Specifically about our first two core values. Our first core value is, what, love. It’s love. Check the poster, I’m not making this up. “We believe that God is love. We believe that God loves everyone in the world.” And our second core value? That’s Grace. “We believe God’s love is unconditional. We don’t earn grace; God loves and forgives us because love and forgiveness is who God is.” Guys, that order, that’s John 3:16 and 17. For God so loved the world, that God gave God’s only Son,” that’s love. “For God did not send the Son in the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved, through him,” that’s grace. We love because of God’s love. And because of the love God has poured into us, we are able to extend that love by expressing grace to ourselves and to others. All of this is rooted, is grounded in this promise of God’s deep, strong, and unending love for us, for the world.

But what about judgment? After all, reading doesn't stop at verse seventeen, it went on, "And this is the judgment..." But notice the tense there. "This is the judgment" Not this will be the judgment, but "this is the judgment... that people loved darkness more than light because their deeds were evil." If eternal life, life lived eternally in the presence of God, is both future promise and our present, lived, reality, what if judgment is too? What if judgment isn't some day we live in fear of, better get it right or else, but the day to day, moment by moment, practice of trying and failing, asking forgiveness, growing and learning and trying again? What if judgment is part of grace. It is the work God is pouring into us, because God loves us, so that God's will for us, for the world, for everyone, may come into being. What if judgment is nothing more, and nothing less, than an honest assessment of the reality of poisonous snakes, those of our own making, those of others making, and those that are just part of living in a broken world, and God's promise that just as so long ago Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, not to take the snakes away, but so that the Israelites could live with snakes, so to must the, has the Son of Man been lifted up on the cross. Remember, this is pre-resurrection Jesus but we are post-resurrection people, so has the Son of Man been lifted up, so that in everything that happens, in our lives, in our struggles, in this world, we have this promise of God's unending presence. A presence which no snake can ever end, for God so loves the world. Thanks be to God, wo loves us, unconditionally, and from whose love everything else flows. Amen.