

Numbers 21:4-9 Pastor Bill Uetricht 4 Lent 3/11/21

I grew up in a relatively stable and healthy home. We were Lutheran so we were used to hearing the kind of words that the author of Ephesians speaks today: “By grace you have been saved; and this is not of your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works.” God for us was a gracious God, but I remember as a middle school boy worrying that that grace thing had its limits. Now I caused almost no problems for my parents. I was boringly compliant. But I was also a middle school boy. And it was the early seventies and guilt was still relatively popular. So, I wondered often in some of my “naughtiness” if I, as the song we will sing after the sermon says, “was [not] sinking down beneath God’s righteous frown.” For me, God was a bit scary.

I don’t regret that view. It probably kept a check on me and my behavior and made me realize that my life was accountable to something larger than myself. But I would or could not stay in that level of understanding.

After high school I went to a relatively progressive Lutheran college that focused my attention on the graciousness of God and the giftedness of all things. I found myself leaving behind what I perceived to be more childish and arcane understandings about God. I learned a lot about the contexts of Biblical texts, began to grasp the pre-modern worldviews of most Biblical writers. Wild and crazy stories about whining people who, because of their naughtiness are visited by venomous snakes, bitten by them, causing some of them to die, seemed totally disconnected to my experience and to my growing understandings of who God is.

For me, God was sheer grace, sheer welcome, overwhelming love. Frankly, my whole ministry has been built around that kind of understanding. For me, the gospel is a radical welcome, especially to the brokenhearted, the left-out, the naughty, sinners. For my

understanding, God is not sitting around waiting to strike you and me with lightning bolts for our poor behavior. I think Ephesians is right. By grace we have been saved, made whole, healed, set free, released.

I've never regretted this view of God. For me, it is such a good foundation for creating real, authentic, healthy individuals and communities. Let's be honest. We're all messed up. Pretending that we aren't isn't helpful. Knowing that God is gracious frees us to tell the truth and not to have live as if we must put on a show for people. Watching what is going on in England with the royal family right now reveals to me how very empty and unhealthy lives that are not focused on grace can become.

You know what, though? For the last decade or so, I have found myself moving into a new understanding of God. Oh, it's not an understanding that removes me from a gracious center, but one that doesn't want me to get lost in what probably can become simply my wishing or in my taking the easy way out. I think [Detriech Bonhoeffer, one of the most compelling and authentic theologians of the 20th century, would put it this way](#): it is essential for us as Christians not to get lost in "cheap grace." After all, it was many grace-centered Lutherans who sat by idly while millions of Jews were sent to the gas chambers by the Nazis.

I want a deeper understanding of who God is, one that, yes, is rooted in God's gracious center, but one that also is willing to allow God to be God, and not just a projection of my self-preoccupied wishes. And you know what has forced me to into a different understanding: an honest confrontation with the scriptures. One of the reasons that dealing with the Bible is so important for Christians is that the Bible has this way of unsettling our settled worlds. Oh yes, there are some things in the Bible that we rightfully shake our heads at. There are portions of it that will not resonate with modern life. But we do ourselves a

disservice—I have done myself a disservice—to dismiss its stories and in particular its views of God that challenge ours.

So, let's revisit the snakes! Yes, this story from Numbers is odd. Yes, it's pre-modern. But it may be worth our while to probe its depths.

The people of Israel are in the middle of the wilderness, and they are growing impatient. They speak against God and against Moses, their mediator. And in what I think is one of the funniest lines in the Bible they say: "Why have you brought us out here to die? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food."

Which is it? You either have food or you don't. So is the real issue you don't like what is being served? You want something different than collard greens and lima beans? Well, it's at this point that God sends to the people the snakes--fiery, monstrous snakes (seraphim), the Hebrew says. Now I can dismiss this as folklore, and it probably is. And I can say that ancient people often sought to explain horrible occurrences in their lives with reference to God and God's actions. And I can remind you and me that we moderns speak of viruses causing sickness and cold fronts and climate change bringing horrible storms. Yes, less and less, do we reference God as the causal agent for many things, for we have science and its explanations. And I am glad, really glad.

But sometimes I wonder if we Christians have removed the dangerous quality of God from our lives. Could it be that God is a lot less predictable, much less safe than we could ever imagine? Have we too often tamed God, made God simply a projection of what we want God to be? In the process, God becomes our buddy, our friend, one who simply affirms our culture, our nation, ourselves. But the God of the Bible is much wilder than that. Cameron Howard says that "a domesticated, unmoving God does not pull a people out of slavery, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land." The wild God of the Bible takes on danger, even produces it.

If you want just to remain the same, you probably ought to stay away from the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is dangerous, unpredictable. Yes, this God loves you. And yes, there is grace for who you are, but this is a fiery grace, a grace that wants to refine you. Don't be surprised that if once in a while you don't find some snakes near your feet.

Notice what happens in this wild snake-at-your-feet story from Numbers. After the snakes arrive, the people start repenting. And Moses then prays on behalf of the people, asking God to take away the snakes. God's response to Moses' prayer is not necessarily to take away the snakes. God gets wild again: "Make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole; and everyone who [has been bitten by the snakes] shall look at it and live."

Oh my! The dangerous God asks the people to face the danger. Looking at the danger will bring them healing. Oh my! And here I thought this was some archaic story that really can't speak to modern life. The 20th century psychologist Carl Jung would love this story. He would see this as a matter of facing our shadow selves, staring at the darkness. Look at a snake to be healed from the snake bites. To get better, you can't keep neglecting the shadow side. You can't keep pretending that it doesn't exist.

Jesus in the gospel of John today says, "For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light because their deeds were evil." We don't want the light to shine on us because we are afraid of being known by others or ourselves. We would rather hide. And people do the hiding today in all kinds of sophisticated and not so sophisticated ways. Through their angry politics, their narrow-minded religion, their addictions, they are busy hiding themselves from themselves and from others. The wild and dangerous God says, "Look at the snake that is lifted up. You are not going to deal with the snakes until you look at

them, until you raise your head up and see them in all of their ugliness and glory.” Perhaps you know this but the antidote (the cure) from snake bites often comes from the venom of the snakes. Many vaccines come from the viruses that cause the problem you are trying to address. What can kill you can also save you.

So Moses says, “You who have been bitten by serpents, look at the snake that is put on a pole and is lifted high for you to see.” And Jesus’ John says something similar: look at the lifted-up cross where Jesus will be placed. “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up.”

What you see in that lifted-up cross really isn’t that pretty. It reveals what we too often are like. It tells the truth about what we do to love. It reveals the evil we would rather not face. But stare at the cross, nonetheless. Stare at it until a crisis is created, until you face the truth about yourself, until you see how you have rejected love, until you are ready to go to that dangerous place where your life cries out to be healed.

Stare at the cross. And keep staring at it until this giant statement of God’s judgment becomes what it is at its core—the greatest statement of love that you will ever know. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” The cross is where he gave his Son. The cross is the supreme sign of self-giving love. Stare at the cross until you are taken to the most dangerous place of all, until the love of God includes you and everybody and everything. That place won’t necessarily be predictable or safe. It wasn’t safe for Jesus. But trust me on this. You won’t want to be any place else, for it will be the place of eternal life, life with God, life that truly matters.