

Are you scared of snakes? Apparently about a third of all adults in the U.S. would say that snakes are their number one fear – more than dying, oddly enough. The fear of snakes affects nearly half of all women and nearly a quarter of all men. We don't know why exactly it is so common. Scientists have suggested that it might come from our evolutionary history. Fear of snakes is a healthy fear to have if you live in the wild. So maybe it developed to protect us from danger.

Our first reading for today from the book of Numbers is a rather strange story about snakes, isn't it? We generally are already uncomfortable with texts in Scripture where God sends suffering to people as punishment for their sin. It doesn't...*fit* with our sense of a loving God. But it is God making *this* the cure for the plague of snakes that makes what we read this morning particularly strange. God tells Moses to make an image of a serpent and put it on a pole, promising that people who are bit by the snakes can but look at the image and live.

If the solution feels a little strange, maybe that's because it was just last week that we heard about the giving of the Ten Commandments. We were reminded in those commandments that idolatry is sin. And yet, here is God telling Moses to make an image of an animal, telling the people to look at this image if they want to be saved. Yes, this is a strange story indeed.

To get at the heart of it, to get at the heart of why this strange solution is the one God chose, we have to get to the heart of what the actual problem was.

We have to remember that the book of Numbers is about the People of God making their way through the wilderness to the Promised Land. After they received the law on Mount Sinai (as we heard last week), the people began journeying to the Promised Land...and what did they do the whole way? They kept grumbling and murmuring. The people keep coming back to this same theme over and over again: "Things were so much better the way they were before."

I'm sure, as Episcopalians – heck, just as Christians – we've never heard this before, right? We've never heard people grumble that they liked the way things used to be. It is a foreign concept to our minds. Right?

So here we have a group of folks complaining during their wilderness wandering over and over again that the “new way” they’re up against is too hard.

In fact, today’s story from Numbers 21 is actually the final culmination of a whole series of grumbling stories. And this time they don’t just complain about Moses or their circumstances, but they grumble against God himself.

In response to this final grumbling moment, God sends poisonous serpents into the camp, killing many of the people, causing them to turn to Moses and ask him to plead with God to save them. God tells Moses to make an image of a serpent and raise it on a pole and tell the people to look at it. Moses does just that, and the people are saved.

But why? Why are the people saved? Is it an idol?

This is an important question to ask because actually this serpent on a pole didn’t go away after Numbers 21. The people kept it around. In fact, around five hundred years later we are told in Second Kings that the people had indeed started treating this bronze serpent as an idol. King Hezekiah, as a part of his reforms of the people’s worship, destroys this five hundred year old bronze serpent, destroys this image that had become an idol, destroyed this thing that had ceased to function how it was intended.

And I’m sure people complained that they liked it better before.

It still begs the question, doesn’t it? Given our propensity to turn things into idols instead of to worship a God who is unseen and mysterious and often confusing to us, given our propensity to make idols, why did God tell Moses to make this serpent?

To understand that, you have to go back to what life was like before – what it was like to live in Egypt before this journey to the Promised Land got underway. The Egyptians, you see, had a whole lot of deities – several of which were serpent deities. You can read in Egyptian history the names and the descriptions of them. It would seem God sends the plague of snakes into the camp as a symbol of the people’s murmuring desire to return to Egypt. Maybe God sends the snakes in order to remind them what Egypt was actually like. If the people really want to go back there, back to the snake gods of Egypt...well, then, let them have snakes.

You see, when Moses raises the image of the snake up, the people are confronted with the stark truth of what life in Egypt was truly like. They are reminded that they were slaves to an idolatrous people, that they built temples to Egyptian gods by the sweat of their brow. The people are reminded that things actually were not that good in Egypt.

They are reminded that our God, a God who refuses images, cannot be depicted or controlled as easily as Egyptian gods. They see the image of a serpent and are reminded that the only way to freedom is to stop yearning for Egypt, instead to continue to move into the mystery of God's leading.

Now let's move forward to our Gospel reading, where Jesus references this strange tale from Numbers. He tells Nicodemus, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." We know, of course, that this lifting up is the lifting up of Christ on the cross.

But what is Christ on the cross? To get at the heart of that, we need to hear Paul's words, which we heard on Ash Wednesday: "God made him to *be* sin who knew no sin, so that, in him, we might be made the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21) What we see on the cross is...our sin. Who we really are, left to ourselves. Nailed to that cross is our selfishness, our complicity in all the wickedness in this world. And, yes, the sin of liking things the way they were.

And what do we *know* to be true? We *always* like things better the way they were – even if the way things were is killing us. The cure for a plague of snakes is a snake – the cure for sin is sin: looking honestly at the *results* of your sin.

As we take this, the fourth step in our Lenten journey, I'd encourage you to look honestly at *your* sin. Don't be afraid. Be bold. See your sin for what it is. Look at the cost of the sin you struggle with. Look at the result. Look at what it does. Because when we look honestly at our *sin* we are forced to confront our *fears*, the fear that *causes* that sin in the first place.

And then...choose. Choose to turn from that sin. Choose to turn from that bronze serpent on the pole, not to keep it hanging around anymore. Choose to turn from sins that never give you the happiness you think they will. Turn from them and see a God who chooses to take our sins for us, to take them upon himself, so that we, you and I, can become children of God.

Because as our Lord said in the Gospel reading: God didn't send the Son into the world to condemn us. God sent the Son to save us – to save us even from ourselves. Amen.