

**Sermon: Snake on a Stick** Numbers 21: 4-9  
Emily Toews, Menno Mennonite Church, March 14, 2021

I like snakes. I've always liked snakes. Hunting for garter snakes with Leonard Janzen used to be a fun Sunday afternoon activity.

My first Science project in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade was researching and writing about Anacondas. I remember volunteering to feel the weight of a boa constrictor resting on my shoulder during an assembly at school. Fascinating! Marvellous! I'd do it again.

In Lake Erie we could sometimes see water snakes from the shore. They'd hide in the rocky shorelines of the islands and in the now clearer water of the Lake you can see them wiggle-swim near shore.

I like snakes – from what I've seen, they don't scare me one bit. But... I've never seen a poisonous snake in real life. And I admit, maybe seeing a cobra or a water moccasin or rattlesnake, or a black mamba would get me really freaked out.

Today's story from the Hebrew Bible is a story that kind of gives me the heeby geebies – but is kind of cool too.

The Israelites are in the desert. They've been there for YEARS! Just a little while ago they were complaining about not having enough water – and God miraculously provides water from a rock. Now, here they are, travelling again and complaining again.

**Numbers 21:4-9** <sup>5</sup>and the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food.”

<sup>6</sup>The LORD sent fiery serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died.

<sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Intercede with the LORD to take away the serpents from us!”

And Moses interceded for the people. <sup>8</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and mount it on a standard. And if anyone who is bitten looks at it, that person will recover.”

So, <sup>9</sup> Moses made a copper serpent and mounted it on a standard; and when anyone was bitten by a serpent, that person would look at the copper serpent and recover.

Weird story eh? Complaining, harsh judgement, lots of snakes! This story has it all – all it needs is a little romance and there we have it – a perfect sci-fi drama. I love the mystery of this story! I jokingly call it “snake on a stick” and when Donna Hostick asked me to write about the “snake on the stick” for last Thursday's meditation, I, complained a little – but it got me thinking. So, if you find this sermon to be repetitive – sobeit. However, I don't know whether I have spent more time thinking about an inconceivable scripture text more than I have this one.

And that leads me to ask, “What exactly can we make of this story today?” And what do we make of Jesus saying to Nicodemus: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up” (Jn. 3:14)?

So, let's explore this mystery together for a little bit.

First, let's look broadly at this story about the snakes in the context of the Hebrew Bible. Our story takes place at the end of a three chapter – three incident section of Numbers – in which all the events and rituals share some commonalities – they all have to do with life and death and sight.

The first chapter in this section - Numbers 19 - isn't really a story – but rather instructions to the priests – on what ritual to do to cleanse a people who have been in contact with death. It is really interesting. Rabbis Arthur Waskow and Phyllis Berman call this ritual of cleansing “the red cow.” (Rabbi Arthur Waskow and Rabbi Phyllis Berman)

Basically, the priest is to choose a red cow – a blemishless heifer - to be sacrificed. It is slaughtered and then completely burned on the red-hot fire of the alter. With the cow, cedarwood, hyssop and a swath of scarlet material is thrown into the fire. Cedarwood for its red color and pungent aroma, hyssop for its internal and external cleansing properties, and the scarlet material for the colour. The burning cow then becomes a spectacle, literally, of redness, and the priest must watch the whole thing intently.

Just imagine that! All that red!

I can remember when I was at Canadian Mennonite Bible College, we would go to the Winnipeg Legislative building at night in the middle of winter and stare hard – burn our retinas – at the yellow lights illuminating the building. Then we'd close our eyes, turn around –face the city – and open our eyes. What colour were the city lights? Purple. Purple is opposite yellow on the colour wheel.

What about the priest, what colour do you think the priest saw when he closed his eyes after staring intently at the red cow in the red fire? Red death? No. Green.

Green grass, green growth, green Tree of Life, green Garden. Life shining through death.

The ashes of all that red were then mixed with water – and this would be the cleansing water used by the general population for ritual cleaning after touching a person who had died. That's basically the first chapter in this section.

In the next chapter – chapter 20 - we have the story of how the people were crying out – complaining for water. God told Moses to assemble all the people and – before their eyes - speak to a rock so that it would yield its water and give drink to the rebelling masses. But all those raucous people, instead of witnessing Moses' impenetrable faith in God, they witnessed Moses' temper tantrum. He doesn't speak to the rock, he hits it. Yet still the rebellious Hebrews were eyewitness to the power of God who made the rock bring forth water.

So that's the setting for our Numbers 21 story about the snakes. We already heard the text, but I want to take it apart a little.

We hear a lot of stories of how the people complained when they were wandering in the desert. I think that we often chuckle a little because we can see how being free in the desert is better than being enslaved - and we can also see where they are going; we know the story.

But while they were told, the people really didn't **know** which was better. And distrust and doubt in Moses and in God resulted in 40 years of wandering so that *that* generation who left Egypt would not enter the promised land – but their children did.

Once again, the people are complaining. But, as I said before, sometimes we just have to chuckle. The people are impatient with the lack of food, and they quickly add that the food that they do have they absolutely detest! “It is not the absence of food that makes them impatient, but rather they’re really tired of the food they have. I mean, how many years can you live by eating Manna? I can understand the desire for filet mignon, medium-rare! Or even some Sunday-night popcorn. Yes. A bit of diversity is always refreshing.

But enough is enough. We read in the Hebrew scriptures that the people wandering in the desert basically spent their leisure time constantly grumbling and complaining. And, like any parent, sometimes too much is too much.

When I was a kid, our mealtime grumbling eventually led to the no yuck rule. If mom or dad heard us say yuck, we had to eat alone in the basement. I think that’s a reasonable consequence for grumbling. But I don’t know whether I agree or approve of God sending “fiery snakes” to bite and kill the grumbling people. And I think that this sentiment is what halts people from seriously looking at this text. We don’t get it. What kind of God would do something like that? Why does God send the snakes – and what’s this with the whole snake on the stick schtick?

With the fiery snakes nipping and snapping all around them, and many of their fellow Israelites lying dead, the people rush to Moses and cry, “We have sinned because we have spoken against God and you; pray to God to remove the snakes from us!” (Num. 21:7)

Moses does so, and God responds, “Make a fiery serpent and put it on a pole so that any who are bitten can look at it and live.” So, Moses makes a nachash nechosheth – a coppery copperhead, a snakey serpent and puts it on a pole. Whenever a snake bit someone, that person could **look** at the copper viper and live.” And they do.

Well, that's the story. Are we now more enlightened about it now that we have **looked** more closely at it?

And in that, is the clincher. The cure for the poisonous snake bites – is to **look** at the cause – stare at it right in the face and you will be healed. It’s an act of faith, a sign of the people’s willingness to turn to God and away from their own anxiety, impatience, and pride.

When you stare at the colours of death right in the face - and then, but not till then, blinking -- you will see luscious green life.

If you stare hard at hard, dry, dead, unchangeable, rocks of life, they will flow, and give fresh life.

And what cures us from serpents? The cure is to stare hard at the serpents in our hearts – that poison our thoughts and our interactions within the community. The cure is to really look and see and make a special point at observing the poisonous snakes of bullying, violence, abuse, fear, doubt and despair and be healed.

All of our scriptures today offer opportunities to think about – to face and look at what is holding us back from God’s desire for our wholeness and healing. When I think of what Jesus said to Nicodemus “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up” I think maybe it starts to make a little more sense. And this might start to sound a bit repetitive – but that’s ok, we can never hear it too much. We too are to look – really see Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

We look to Jesus hanging on that cross – it's not pretty – but when we really look at it - see it – stare at it – what do we see? I see love. I see passion. I don't see despair. Looking at Jesus' life, death and resurrection this way helps me to de-mythify some of the fears that I have – that discipleship will be easy, that death is the end, that we are alone. I see love for God; passion for God's people; true submission to God; and hope.

And when I look at that cross, I see my own death – and the poison that I keep in my heart – and it doesn't seem as scary. Similarly, I could obsess – and I sometimes do – about all the ways that I have been hurt in the past. All the anger and malice builds up and I start to feel vengeful – and this poisons me. How can I be saved? If we follow our texts today, then we know! Look at it. Look at all that hurt and anger and whatever else is killing your spirit. Examine it. Name it! What is my part and what is not? What do I need to let go and give to God? What do I need to say – who do I need to have listen?

In 2012 I had the opportunity to witness – see – behold – look at – and participate in the meetings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada – that was gathering in Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan. For those of you who don't know, "The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) provided those directly or indirectly affected by the legacy of the [Indian Residential Schools](#) system with an opportunity to share their stories and experiences with the hope that the truth of the common experiences would help free the broken spirits of our indigenous neighbours and pave the way for reconciliation.

At these TRC hearings the residential school survivors, their children and grandchildren, government leaders, church workers and leaders, and the wider community was invited to come together to bear witness to the pain –of thousands. At the meetings in Fort Qu'Appelle, I heard accounts of how God and punishment walked hand in hand. And the stories made me weep.

Telling the stories. Acknowledging that we, the "civilized church" have caused generational damage to a people loved by God is humbling. We MUST face our part in that – however large it is. Just like the voicing of the horrible experiences opens the door for healing, so too the HEARING of the stories opens the door for new ways of looking and understanding a different point of view. Hopefully someday – God willing – bringing reconciliation.

I tell this story of the TRC and our indigenous neighbours only to illustrate what it means to really look at Christ on the cross – to really look at the snake on the stick.

To really look at death right in the face. You've got to do it because without doing it, you're going to die.

And God will be there too -holding up our eyelids when ours become too weary, opening the eyes of our hearts so that we can see beyond death – to new life – and growing within us the first shoots of new grass in a dark and desolate wilderness. Paving a road to freedom.

Because when we look death in the face – Christ's death, our fear of death, the thoughts that we have that poison our relationships...when we really stare at it – then it has less power.

THAT's when the colours change,

Because when we look death in the face – Christ's death, our fear of death, the thoughts that we have that poison our relationships...when we really stare at it – then it has less power.

THAT's when the desert rocks crack and bring forth water.

Because when we look death in the face – Christ’s death, our fear of death, the thoughts that we have that poison our relationships...when we really stare at it – then it has less power.

And THAT’s when the poison leaves our bodies and we begin to heal.

Thanks be to God for Christ on the Cross. May we always look to you.