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Numbers 21:4-9 & John 3:14-16

“Surviving A Snakebite”

My first encounter with a rattlesnake in the wild is seared in my memory. I was hiking on the south rim of the Grand Canyon on a hot, sunny day. The air was still. I was plodding along, head down, lost in my thoughts. Suddenly, I heard the rattle. I had never heard a rattlesnake in person, but I knew instantly what it was.

When you hear it, you realize there’s nothing else it could be. Not only did I recognize it instantly. I immediately froze in place. I did not have a snakebite kit in pack, if there even is such a thing. I didn’t have a cell phone at the time. Calling for a rescue was not an option.

I looked up and there it was, coiled on a rock in the middle of the trail. I’d say it was about twenty feet away. I stood and watched it for a few minutes. In these kinds of encounters, people will often say, “The animal is more afraid than you are.” In this situation, I didn’t get that sense. Since she seemed content to stay where she was, I went around.

That memory serves as a reminder to me that there are dangers in the wilderness. The desert can be an uncompromising environment. We see that in our story today. God had a purpose. God wanted to take the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt to what we know as the promised land, a place described in the Bible as a land “flowing with milk and honey.”

Getting to that place of freedom and prosperity required a long journey through the wilderness and it was a hard journey. There’s no doubt about it. The Israelites struggled in that harsh, arid environment and they began to complain. However, their complaining didn’t seem to be a response to any life-threatening crisis. It was more of an impatient tirade. God sent manna from heaven, but they wanted something more interesting to eat.

I have a friend who likes to say, “I don’t want pie in the sky. I want ham where I am.” The Israelites were promised a land and prosperity at some future time, in some unknown place. They were tired of wandering in the desert. Don’t give me pie in the sky. Give me ham where I am.

In their complaining they seemed to lose sight of the big picture. They seemed to forget that this was all God’s doing. God led them out of Egypt. God promised them a land to call their own. God was in control, but as a result of their struggles in the wilderness, they seemed to have lost their trust and their faith in God.

So, how did God respond? Snakes! God’s response to their complaining was to torment them with poisonous serpents. Now, I know what you’re thinking. What kind of a God would send snakes to bite people and kill them simply because they complained too much? I’m guessing that if the penalty for complaining too much were death, you probably

know someone who would have died a long time ago. I would have been dead a long time ago.

But look at what happened. The complaining came to a halt. The people went to Moses and repented. They confessed, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." Apparently, there is nothing like a plague of a poisonous snakes to reorient a person. And I think that reorientation is what this text is about.

Think about when it is that people tend to turn to God. It's usually when there's a crisis. It's when the diagnosis comes back positive, or the marriage disintegrates, or a catastrophe strikes. We all probably remember the surge in attendance at houses of worship following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

I think the wilderness is a great metaphor for life. Our lives are a wilderness journey. I had a seminary professor who said life is more wilderness than promised land. Not just our bodies, but our souls hunger and thirst. We struggle. At birth, we struggle to take our first breath.

That struggle never seems to end. We struggle to maintain relationships. I once heard a story about a couple who went out to dinner to celebrate their fortieth wedding anniversary. After pouring champagne, they raised a glass. The woman looked her husband in the eye and said, "In spite of everything."

For me, Middle School was a barren and arid wilderness with all the pressure to fit in and the social awkwardness. I couldn't put those years behind me quickly enough. We might spend time in the wilderness of self-doubt and insecurity. For some, it is a wilderness of addiction, or a wilderness of family dysfunction, or a wilderness of oppression and bigotry. This last year has been one long wilderness journey. At times, just getting through the day can be a major accomplishment.

Our lives tend to resemble the wilderness more than they do a land flowing with milk and honey. In the wilderness, it's easy to feel sorry for oneself or to complain. When your oldest messed up at school yet again, when you wake up to a sink full of dirty dishes day after day, when each day seems to blend into the next, it's easy to forget about God or to take God's goodness for granted. Our faith in God's power and presence can wane.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying complaint is bad. There are legitimate reasons to complain and I believe God wants to hear every one of them. It's just that, every so often, faith requires a reorientation from our problems back to our divine problem solver.

And here's the thing. In the wilderness journey that is life, sometimes you get bitten by the snake. Sometimes you don't hear the rattle. Your first indication of danger is two fangs in your ankle. When Moses prayed on behalf of the people, God instructed him to make a poisonous serpent and raise it up on a pole. Everyone who gets bitten would look at it and live. So, Moses crafted a snake out of bronze.

There is no doubt, this is a strange story. Why would gazing at a statue of a snake be the antidote for a snakebite? Can it be that which can kill you can also heal you? Maybe it

just depends on one's orientation. Trivial and self-indulgent complaints led to death. Faith in the power of the bronze serpent would heal.

For the Israelites to gaze upon the bronze snake was an act of reorientation. Their belief in its power would heal them. I think we need reminders of how powerful belief can be. There's medical evidence that trust in one's doctor, or belief in the power of one's medication, or commitment to one's treatment plan can play a very important role in healing from trauma or disease. I'm sure many of you know the symbol for the American Medical Association is a snake on a pole.

It may be that God's purpose in this strange story is to provide a means for healing when people in pain remember and look to God. I'm guessing that's why some of us wear a cross around our neck. That's why the cross is a symbol we keep before us in the sanctuary. In the first century, Romans nailed Jewish people on crosses in order to stifle dissent. Crosses were all about humiliation and death.

In John's gospel, Jesus said, "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. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

For some reason, God has ordered this world so that which could kill you can also heal you. A poisonous snake became the antidote for a snake bite. Death on a cross became the path to eternal life. All that was required was to gaze at that which was lifted up.

I'm glad that, in the wilderness journey of life, all I have to do is reorient myself to God in order to find healing. All I have to do is look to Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of my faith," and believe. The psalmist said, "I lift my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth."

Life is a wilderness journey, but there is a promised land. Don't stop until you find it.