



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 4 (B)

Fear

[RCL] Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

There is no more familiar passage in all of Scripture than John 3:16. It has been emblazoned on billboards and bumper stickers, sewn into throw pillows and baseball caps, and it has even appeared tattooed into the skin of more than a few actors and athletes.

And yet, for as familiar as the sixteenth verse of John's third chapter is, it is juxtaposed against the verses immediately preceding it, which are undoubtedly some of the most unfamiliar verses in the New Testament. Here, Jesus makes reference to Moses lifting up a snake in the wilderness, which hearkens back to one of the most bizarre stories in Torah.

The story to which Jesus is referring is found in the book of Numbers. Here, we encounter the Hebrew people, having long been liberated from the Egyptians, but still wandering in the wilderness in search of the land which has been promised. The longer they wander, the crankier they become. They take aim at God and Moses alike, crying out in petulant frustration.

All told, Numbers depicts five of these so-called "murmuring episodes," wherein the Hebrew people grumble and complain about an assortment of perceived grievances. They don't like the food; they want more water; they're tired; they want to go back to Egypt; they're sick of camping. Picture a minivan loaded up for a road trip with a gaggle of disgruntled toddlers kicking the seats, throwing popcorn, and screaming, "Are we there yet?" and you won't be far off!

Each episode follows a predictable pattern: the Hebrew people complain, God gets angry, the Hebrew people realize they've made God angry and beg Moses to intercede on their behalf, Moses does, and God calms down. Then, a few chapters later, another tantrum erupts, and the same pattern unfolds. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Finally, their sniping reaches a boiling point. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness," they grumbled against God and Moses, "For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food."

If you listen carefully, you'll catch the level of absurdity underpinning their whining. "There is no food and water," they moan in one breath, and then, "we detest this miserable food," they carp in the next breath. In response, God punishes them for their insolence and sedition by sending venomous snakes into the encampment.

Now, at this point, some of us may be thinking, "Well that was a little harsh, God. Those snakes bit people, and some folks even died!" But we must leaven our reading of Scripture with a bit of theological imagination.

The Hebrew people were faced with a choice. On the one hand was a life-giving relationship with God that challenged everything they thought they knew about the way the world worked and pushed them to greater depths of faith and obedience. On the other hand was the monotony of slavery in Egypt which would surely lead to death, but at least it offered some semblance of consistency and predictability along the way.

Over and over again, the Hebrew people voiced their desire to go back to Egypt and pick up where they left off as slaves to Pharaoh. In one scene, they actually hatch a plan of sedition: "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt" (Num. 14:4b). At least in Egypt, they knew how the system worked. With God, there was no telling where they would be led, or what they would be asked to do. So enough with this "chosen people" stuff, we'll take our mundane life of slavery back, thank you very much!

And yet, the narrative arc of the Old Testament in particular, and Scripture in general, is one of a relentless and undeterred God doing whatever it takes to maintain a relationship with humankind. Even here, as the Hebrew people are hell-bent on marching back to certain death in Egypt because they feared what they did not know and couldn't predict, God is ultimately and inexorably the source of life. As the Hebrew people repent from their foolish and seditious ways, God hears their prayer and once again sets before them a wellspring of life and healing.

But the way God chooses to do it is what makes this passage even stranger: God tells Moses to craft a venomous snake and put it onto a pole so that those who were bitten could look at it and be healed. Moses did as he was told, and crafted a venomous snake from bronze, put it on the pole, and set it in the midst of the people. Whenever a snake bit someone, they looked at the bronze snake and lived.

In fact, the statue worked so well that it became a kind of cultural icon among the Hebrew people. The statue was passed from one generation to the next until, centuries later, it winds up in the temple in Jerusalem. By then, it had garnered both a name (*Nehushtan*) and a cult-like following, which prompts King Hezekiah to have it destroyed. (2 Kings 18:4)

Although there is little hope that this unfamiliar and bizarre tale will make it into the Vacation Bible School curriculum anytime soon, at its heart is a universal truth: there is no venom quite so deadly as fear.

Fear of the unknown; fear of the other; fear of failure; fear of death—nothing causes spiritual and emotional paralysis more effectively than fear. It corrodes faith, cuts off our pathways for giving and receiving grace and mercy, and if it is left untreated long enough, it gives way to hatred, recalcitrance, hardness of heart and soul, and leads ultimately to death.

As we continue on our Lenten journey, there may be no more important time for us to take account of the ways in which each of us are afflicted by the venom of fear. Only when the Hebrew people brought that which they feared most into full view, were they made whole.

The same is true for us. As we come into full view of the cross and the reality of death, it is only by walking headlong into death's dark shadow that we come to know the fullness of Christ's resurrected life.

For indeed, God so loves the world. Amen.

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