

Sermon for March 11, 2018 (Lent4B) “Snakes on a Plain”
(Based on Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-21)

It had been a hard season. Food and water were hard to come by, and it wasn't just the people who were complaining: all the wild creatures, disturbed by their presence, were unhappy too, hungry and thirsty and restless.

When that cranky bunch of Israelites blundered into the serpents' den, I'm not sure who was madder. But those snakes started doing what snakes tend to do when they're upset, and it set off one heck of a chain reaction. And, as it turns out, the band of God's faithful hadn't packed a snakebite kit.

This is a crazy story. In the midst of a terrible situation, Moses prays to God, and what is God's answer? “Make a metal snake, and put it on a stick. Everyone who looks at it will live.” How is that going to help anyone?

This story, like any folktale passed down through many generations, is a big onion. It has layers and layers of meaning, each capable of releasing rich flavors and many tears. If you tend to approach the Bible as literal truth, you'll never get a full mouthful of the long-simmered, caramelized stew that metaphors can produce. Too many layers. It just sounds like a story where everyone's being terrible to each other: the snakes may get the worst rap, but the Israelites are not winning any prizes for good behavior, and—frankly—neither is God. Also, do you know how hard it is to choose hymns that match up with two stories full of snakes?

If snakes had to fill out Facebook profiles, their relationship status—in regard to people, and in regard to religions—would read, “it's complicated.” Snake in Eden: bad. But Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel, “be as wise as a serpent, and as gentle as a dove.” Give a snake some wings, and it gets even more complicated: dragons. The traditions of the Far East and the British Isles are full of dragons, symbols of power and terror, majesty and tyranny in equal parts. In many cultures, snakes are symbols of resurrection, because they shed their skins. And speaking of snakes on sticks, if you wear a medical alert bracelet or see an ambulance go past, you've seen the caduceus: the symbol of medicine and healing. It's a stick. With snakes.

Serpents have a deep connection, in the mind of the world, with healing.

If you travel by boat along the Inside Passage, along the edge of Vancouver Island in British Columbia, you might notice some of the ancient red ochre petroglyphs painted high on the island's rocky cliffs. One shows a serpent with two heads: *Sisuitl*. You might also notice trees that look like corkscrews, with crazy, twisted bark. It's said they got that way trying to escape this terrible monster. *Sisuitl* likes to eat souls. And when *Sisuitl* comes toward you, the Native elders say, you must stand your ground, even when the serpent comes close enough that you can smell its terrible breath. As the serpent brings its two heads close to devour your soul, each head will finally look into the other's eyes—and whoever sees the other half of themselves sees truth. In thanksgiving for this rare and precious gift, *Sisuitl* will not devour your soul, but will instead preserve your life, and give you a blessing.

It can be terrifying, this facing of our fears, this looking into the other faces of ourselves. I heard yet another story this morning about Russian “troll farms” where they create images designed to divide Americans from one another by manipulating social media. Turns out they've been employing one group to create hundreds of opposing memes, eye-catching, easily-shared images with provocative text. One set shows oil spills and Native Americans at Standing Rock with captions like, “fight for the earth. Love your mother.” The other set—made by the same Russian group—mocks environmental activists and calls for more drilling and fracking. I'm beginning to think the best form of resistance is to resist anyone's attempt to divide me from my sisters and brothers. Even John's Gospel falls into the trap. Jesus came into the world not to judge, but to save. And then John launches into several verses of harsh judgement, dividing the lovers of light and the lovers of darkness. It's that hard to stand and face the serpent of our two-faced nature. Even a Gospel writer can miss the mark.

But when the poison of that serpent has infected us and everyone around us, we're still called to stand and see it, to stand and be a witness, to take that risk. What is the risk? There's the risk that the truth might be revealed. There's always the risk that we might unlock the power of deeper understanding, the kind of understanding

that sends out a shockwave that can flatten fences and send our carefully-built fortresses tumbling down like the walls of Jericho. There's a risk, in all of this, that our souls might be transformed. What if our deepest fear is not the unknown, but the possibility that God knows us completely? What if our deepest fear is not the looming terror of death, but the thought of a love so big, so powerful, that it looms even bigger than death-- a love that calls on us to change everything?

The poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, wrote a series of letters to a young friend. Rilke's friend felt overwhelmed by his emotions and the challenges that swirled around him. Rilke wrote to him with these words:

...you must not be frightened if a sadness rises up before you larger than any you have ever seen; if a restiveness, like light and cloudshadows, passes over your hands and over all you do. You must think that something is happening with you, that life has not forgotten you, that it holds you in its hand; it will not let you fall. Why do you want to shut out of your life any uneasiness, any miseries, or any depressions? For after all, you do not know what work these conditions are doing inside you."

How should we be able to forget those ancient myths that are at the beginning of all peoples, the myths about dragons that at the last moment turn into princesses; perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave...

Jesus is raised up in our midst—a sign for everyone to see, a witness to a love more powerful than anything we can imagine. Like a dragon, with the sunlight shining off every scale, like a bronze serpent that stops us in our tracks with the beauty and grace of its strange form, and heals us from our misery and division, our terror and fear. Jesus is raised up like a sign in the wilderness, a sign that love is more important than condemnation, a sign that, even in the midst of everything that cuts us down and grinds away at us, we are being healed and held in the heart of God.

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