

4 Lent B March 11, 2018
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Snake bites
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

There is a song I've never heard that has gotten quite a bit of attention lately because it is believed to be controversial. It is a song about a snake. And a tender-hearted woman who found the snake nearly frozen to death on the side of a road. When the snake begged to be taken in and cared for, the tender-hearted woman did so, and took the snake into her own home. Once restored to health, however, the snake turned on its care-giver and gave her a poisonous bite, dooming her to death. When she asked the snake why it returned her kindness and sacrifice for a death bite, the snake chided the woman by telling her she knew what the snake was when she took it in, and therefore should expect nothing less, for a snake will always be a snake.

First released in 1968 and sung by Al Wilson, the song has gotten attention lately for being interpreted as warning Americans against immigrants. However, the daughters of the song's writer, Oscar Brown, said that was far from their father's intention when he wrote the song in 1963. Brown, a noted leader in the Civil Rights movement, wrote the song, his daughters claim, as an expression of the African American culture's way of turning a story into a proverb. The song was based on one of Aesop's fables called "The Farmer and the Viper", which has the exact same story line. In a recent interview Brown's daughters say their father's intention was not a warning against any group of people; it was meant to be more of a proverb typical of their culture. It was, in their words, another way of saying, "If you sleep with dogs, don't be surprised if you wake up with fleas."

It turns out Aesop's Fable about the Farmer and the Viper has influenced other writers in the past, including Cicero and Erasmus from the Classical period. It appeared in stories written in the Middle Ages where it also took on a proverbial feel. It inspired Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story titled *Egotism, or The Bosom-Serpent*. Published in 1843, Hawthorne gave the story an interesting psychological twist where the snake or serpent represented an obsession that turned the man who harbored it in his bosom or heart snake-like, spreading cruel poison to people until he learned to love. Hawthorne wrote the cure for the bosom-serpent was to forget yourself in the idea of another. While not one of his most popular works, it did go on to inspire other writers.

Snakes and stories of snakes and people not getting along are a deeply ingrained in nearly every culture and every time. We can't even get very far into the Bible before a snake appears in Genesis and we learn snakes will bear the curse of enmity between humanity and its kind. A curse that seems evident in all the stories about snakes we humans love to tell each other.

One of those stories about snakes even seemed to inspire Jesus in today's Gospel lesson. To help us understand what Jesus was talking about when he mentioned being lifted up like Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, we need to go back to our first lesson from the Old Testament book of Numbers where we heard about the People of God not just complaining, they were complaining against God and against Moses.

The People of God often come across as problematic during their long walk to the Promised Land. If we read the several accounts of their journey as it appears in not only Exodus, but in other parts of the Old Testament including Numbers, it sounds like once the adrenaline of crossing the Red Sea wore off, God's People became a bunch of whiners, where nothing was ever good enough for them, they were unprepared for the "real world" and most often expressed a desire to give up their freedom and go back to the oppression of the Egyptians, which looked a whole lot better to them on this side of the Red Sea. To me, the journey of the Israelites from the oppression of Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land is like one very long road trip God and God's People took together, and Moses drove. There were parts of the road trip that were exciting, and there were parts that were difficult, there were unexpected pitfalls, and there were unexpected delights.

Today's Old Testament lesson sounds to me like the part of the road trip where everyone got on everyone's last nerve. Anyone who has ever taken a road trip knows about those moments. They can happen, especially if the trip is long and the next rest stop is too far away and is closed when you get there or isn't as refreshing as you expected. In today's reading the People had been on their journey a very long time, and their diet had been consistent but not very diverse. They were getting tired in more ways than one and when simply complaining about their situation wasn't giving them any comfort, they turned against Moses and they turned against God. They didn't just want to go back, they wanted new leadership and a new god who could set a decent table. And God, who had seemingly showed God's People infinite patience during this difficult transition for them, showed patience no more. Once the people turned against God, we heard

God, who had showed them how to find food and water in the wilderness, now exposed God's People to venomous snakes that appeared and started biting the people. These snake bites were painful. And deadly. So, is God the snake the people brought in? Or was God the tender-hearted farmer or woman who took in a people crying for freedom who ended up biting the very hand of God that fed them by turning against God and Moses? It's hard to do a direct comparison, because in their fear and pain, the People of God repented, and asked God for forgiveness and healing, and when Moses prayed on behalf of the very same people who were complaining against him only a few sentences before, God sent a means of healing restoration in the form of a symbol of the snakes that bit God's People, snakes sent because of the People's refusal to accept what God had given them.

As translator and commentator Mark Davis has written, this is a pretty powerful story, because to find a cure and be restored to God who the People had said they no longer wanted any part of, they had to look up from their swelling and painful snake bites to the symbol of their disobedience. And by facing their sin, they were healed and restored as God's People.

It is that story Jesus referenced when he talked about the Son of Man, or himself, being lifted up on the cross. In John's Gospel, the crucifixion is not a thing of shame, it is how God is glorified. That might be challenging for us to understand, and I doubt this sermon will be able to help us understand it completely. But there is something lifted up in that cross for us to behold, even if it is not easy to do so.

It is not easy to look up from the bites any of us can feel from toxic stings, certainly not from literal snakes, and certainly not from any group of people, but those bites from the serpents we bring upon ourselves when we turn from God's ways or the bites resulting from the hurts someone has done to us. Just as it must have been a frightening challenge for the Israelites to lift their eyes and change their focus from the dangers around them and look up. Because when they looked up, they could no longer watch the snakes at their feet nor focus on the snake bites festering in their own bodies, they had to shift focus to something other than themselves in order to be healed. They had to focus on Who they had turned against. Those bites though, they can be so painful, they can easily take all our focus and make us forget we are more than the pain we feel at any given time. The way we remember there is more than pain, is to look up.

Not to the sky. Not to the stars. Though there is beauty in both. If we, as followers of Jesus, are to keep our eyes on Jesus, that means we are to look to the cross. The cross may not serve the exact same purpose as the bronze serpent of Moses in the Old Testament. Perhaps instead it can remind us there is more to life than our pain, there is God's pain, brought about by how we hurt each other and how we turn against God. And how God doesn't condemn us for being the kind of being that bites the divine hand that gives love, and instead divine love uses that pain to transform death into life. That is how God works. Perhaps it is by facing God's pain that we can see beyond our own pain into the divine life God has for us all, if we just look up from our fears; if we look up from our anxieties, if we look up from whatever tries to distract us and look up into the divine love of God. Oh, what would we see, if we just look up to God?