

You remember the story about the snakes, right? Not the Indiana Jones movie with all the snakes in the chamber where the lost Ark of the Covenant was hidden. Not the one where the snakes took over an airplane. I mean the story that is at the heart of Jesus' conversation with the pharisee Nicodemus in today's Gospel. If you don't remember, its well worth hearing it again because it is a story Jesus used in that conversation to reveal not just who he is or why he came, it is also has so much to say about our lives as followers of Jesus, especially when things get rough or don't turn out the way we had anticipated or want.

It's a story in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter in the Old Testament book Numbers and is about the Israelites during their long time in the wilderness after they were liberated from slavery in Egypt but before they were ready to enter the Promised Land. There are many stories about God's People in their wilderness, and most of them reveal how hard it was for God's People to let go of the practices they had when they were slaves in order to live as a people free to worship and follow God. As slaves in Egypt they had not learned how to provide for their own needs like food and water because they were too busy laboring all day long for their masters. They probably didn't have any wilderness survival skills like recognizing a good area to travel or camp. Their masters probably would have discouraged such skills in order to keep the people compliant slaves completely dependent on their masters for their basic needs and security. This is one of the many reasons why slavery is wrong.

The stories do tell us there was something God's People were very good at. You might say they were so good at it, it could be considered their spiritual gift. God's People were excellent complainers. And in all those wilderness stories, including the one with the snakes, that is usually where the trouble for God's People starts. The farther from Egypt God's People traveled, and the longer they had to endure the wilderness, their memories of their former lives as slaves began to change. They began to believe some aspects of slavery weren't that bad. Like having food, water, and shelter provided for them. In reality it might not have been the best food, or the cleanest water, or the safest shelter, but nostalgia is like that. It can forget such details.

That is why God's People complained. They complained there was no water. So, God told Moses to take the people to a rock and water poured out of it. In response, the people complained there was nothing to eat. So, God told Moses to tell the people to collect the light bread like substance that covered the ground each morning and the

people discovered manna, bread from heaven. It wasn't long before the bread from heaven, as miraculous as it seemed, wasn't filling enough, and the people complained they had no meat to satisfy their hunger. So, God told Moses to tell the people they could kill the quail that would appear on a regular basis to eat. In every instance the people complained, God provided for their needs.

Did the people of God respond to this provision with gratitude? Or by changing their ways to start paying attention to the wilderness and figuring out how to live there? No. They didn't. They just kept complaining. In fact, it got worse. Until the people complained that there was no food, despite the obvious fact that there was food, and the food they had was not good enough. They were sick and tired of the same old thing every day. And the people complained against God in high dramatic fashion, claiming God is not a God of life and new life, but a God of death who had brought them out of Egypt so that they might die. This might not sound too terrible to you and me, but theologically, it is serious to complain against God, especially to claim God wanted to destroy them, and to claim God is a God of death not life.

That's where the snakes come into the story. Not harmless garden snakes or the friendly black snakes we have around here that help keep the rodent population down. These were poisonous serpents whose bite produced painful suffering and death. In the story, it says God sent the poisonous serpents as a punishment. And that is possible. But we've got to be careful about reading these stories too literally. After all, there is no evidence these stories are about cataloging a journey. It's more likely they are theological in nature; intended to help us learn about God, humanity's relationship with God and our human nature. Maybe God sent the poisonous serpents to show the people there can be different consequences to their behavior other than getting what you ask for: that speaking poison for a long time can bring poison back to bite you. Or maybe God's People were so busy complaining they didn't notice they were headed into an area where there lots of poisonous serpents. Either way, God was able to show God's People God is more powerful than any slave master, and God really is a God of life, even when God's People spread the poison they are infected with.

God instructed Moses to make a tall pole and put a serpent made of bronze on the pole and lift it up over God's People. When the people lifted up their faces and looked at the serpent hanging on the pole, they would be cured from the effects of the poison in serpent's bite and live. This is particularly brilliant of God. Because when the people looked at the serpent on the pole they did so not to be convicted or punished for their wrongdoing or their sins. And they weren't looking at a serpent God loved and killed in order to sooth God's wrath. In looking at the bronze serpent they were looking at themselves and what happens when they spread poison by refusing to be grateful, complaining for the sake of complaining, or continuously refusing to let go of the things they needed to let go of. It must have been a hard thing for them to do, to

look up at such a symbol, one that cut to heart of and exposed the brokenness of God's People. Yet that is what they had to be courageous enough to do in order to live, to be healed, to discover God really is a God of tremendous love and new life, a life where we all live the way of God's love. Recognizing that brokenness was how God invited God's people to change and let God deliver them into that new life.

That is what Jesus reminded Nicodemus of in today's Gospel reading. This conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus is fascinating, partly because John's Gospel is written in such a way that we can't take the words literally, we have to take them seriously and pay attention to what each word and symbol is pointing us to. For example, the detail that Nicodemus came at night could mean a lot of different things. One possibility could be it is meant to remind of us the Prolog of John's Gospel where the author contrasts the darkness of the world; the ignorance, the rebelliousness, of the world to the Light that has come into the world in Jesus. Perhaps the author of John is suggesting Nicodemus and Jesus are from two different worlds. Which might be why Nicodemus appeared to struggle to understand Jesus at first; maybe he didn't yet realize he couldn't take Jesus' words literally, and had to see the illustrations, metaphors, and stories that are pointing to the beautiful, powerful truth shining like a light in the room: that Jesus is so much more than wisdom teacher or miracle worker, but is himself God's Son who when lifted up on the cross is showing humanity the same thing the bronze serpent showed God's People all those millennia ago: our sinful preference to trust in violence to save us from our brokenness. Our sinful belief that it is good for one person to suffer if it means we don't have to suffer the consequences of our actions, prejudices, fears, or anger.

This is hard stuff to face up to. It takes courage to do so. But like the serpent on the pole, it is also the first step to allowing God to deliver us into the new life the life of the resurrected Christ, that has already begun and is also yet to come fully into the world, where God's way of love is the way we choose to live. That is salvation, and it is why, according to John's Gospel, Jesus came into the world. To reveal that God is not a God who punishes, but loves the world in such a way that the world, the whole world, might be saved, might be delivered into that resurrection life, through the one on the cross.

Speaking of the cross, we'll see Nicodemus again; during Jesus' trial and after his crucifixion when he helped bury Jesus' body. Something in Nicodemus must have been powerfully affected by this conversation for him to speak on behalf of and to be present to Jesus at such a difficult time. Nicodemus had courage.

Which might be why we have this reading during the Season of Lent, a time marked by fasting and self-discipline. Today's Gospel reminds us Lent can be a season of something deeper too. It can be a time when we are invited to reflect and look at

our own sins; our preference for following fear and anxiety and letting that fear justify the sins of racism, sexism, ageism, believing we can save ourselves from our own brokenness through what we purchase or how much of something we keep to ourselves instead of sharing. It's hard to acknowledge these things, especially when it is so much easier to follow fear and complain when things don't go the way we want. There are so many creative ways to complain. But we don't have to be afraid, because the story of the snakes, and today's Gospel remind us God isn't out to punish us, God wants to do something so much more unbelievable to us. God wants to deliver us into a new life, with the Holy Spirit as the midwife who will help birth us into resurrection life. The hardest part for us might be letting go of our need to be in control and surrender to God's powerful love, which already has us, and holds us, no matter what is going on in our lives and in the world around us. Even when all the news on television and the papers and social media is all bad news, especially then, God has us in those almighty loving hands. So please don't despair, and don't lose hope. Remember that God so loves the world God sent God's Only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Thanks be to God.