

“Garden Snakes”

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

March 11, 2018

Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:14-21

The first time I woke up with a hangover, my older sister poured a mimosa and slid the glass towards me, announcing with sophistication “that which kills you cures you.” Her “cure” actually made me feel greener-- and not in that springy fresh kind of way-- but then again, I have never been nearly as sophisticated as my sister Alice.

Our lectionary passage from the Hebrew scriptures gives a cure made from the thing that the Israelites found most dangerous. In Numbers, which is part of the Torah, we have a bizarre story. Much like when the Israelites moaned and groaned in Exodus about not having any food, and God responded by raining down manna and quail, this time we have the Israelites moaning and groaning yet again: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food,” they complained to Moses and to God. But this time we don’t see God’s compassionate side; instead of manna and quail, the people receive poisonous serpents slithering about and striking people with death. When the people feel deep remorse for what they have done, God tells Moses to fashion a serpent of bronze, set it on the pole, and instruct the people to gaze upon the serpent to be healed whenever they are bitten.

This is a bizarre story. Before we get too deep into this sermon, I want to step out and tell you that I don’t see this story speaking to the heart of who God is. It shows an unpredictable God that both harms and heals; in one

part of the Torah, when people complain of their hunger, God sends manna and quail to eat; in the other, God sends snakes that kill a few people. The punishment-- death-- seems to far outweigh the crime, which was just a little bit of complaining. This is a walking-on-eggshells kind of God, a God with whom it would be hard to form relationships of love and trust because you are so afraid of what unexpected thing you might do next that will set God off. I will have to ask my colleague Rabbi Barry Schartz if the rabbis of the Talmud ever supposed that the dangerous serpents were already in the wilderness, and the wandering Hebrews saw them and assumed they must be a punishing gift from God.

And yet this story of Moses and the serpent on a stick is the story to which Jesus refers in his conversation with Nicodemus, a Pharisee who, because of his religious affiliation, would have known exactly what Jesus was talking about.

Keep in mind that Nicodemus-- who had approached Jesus at night in darkness-- was speaking with Jesus of what it means to be born from above. Assuming a parent is good enough, the parent-child relationship is one marked by love and trust. So when someone is born from above, of the Spirit, they are able to place their love and trust in God as they would in a parent.

Lately I have been thinking about the time when my daughter learned how to walk. She was a baby on the move and began walking early, at 8 months old. We have videos of her standing with a parent behind her, bending her knees up and down, but not walking until the parent moved from behind her to a few steps in front of her, facing her. The delight on her face spread as she toddled over to her mother, showing that her legs moved in response to the joy and love to which she was moving. I've been thinking about those times because now my daughter is learning how to roller skate, with the pair of skates my dad gave her for her 6 year old birthday. She is as determined to skate as she was to walk, but when she

takes off in front of me she looks at the cracks on the sidewalk, the neighbors passing by, or over her shoulder to see what I am doing. Inevitably, she crashes. However, when I stand far in front of her, that same look of joy I saw on her as a baby learning to walk spreads across her face as she glides on her skates towards me and does not fall, arriving safely into my arms with fits of laughter.

For God so loved the world... For God so loved the world, that God gave the only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Too often this verse gets tossed about as a boasting line, to separate the salvation of those who believe from the condemnation of those who don't. To me, this statement is generous and expansive rather than isolating and condemning. It operates from a baseline of love and trust, not fear and punishment. It says that love and trust is available to everyone-- for the world.

Yet, even as we try to cultivate a relationship of love and trust with God, we find these garden snakes slithering around. They are the snakes of fear and punishment. When we look to God, we see snakes and wonder if we will be the next to be bitten.

But Jesus insists that God did not send the son into the world as a punishment. Jesus is not a venomous snake. In Luke's gospel, Jesus asks, "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for^[e] a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ If you then...know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit^[f] to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:11-13). Jesus calls us to orient our relationship with God in love.

In this created world we will certainly find snakes around us. We will find that the earth and the people within it yield both things that heal, and things that harm. What are the venomous snakes in your life? I am sure as we

hear soon from Julie Taylor about the injustices farm workers often face, we will discover snakes slithering around in her stories. But the snakes are not our punishment from God.

As we prepare to share communion later in the service, may we approach the table with the love and trust of a child looking to the God from whom we were born. May we be so shaped by that extraordinary, generous love, that our actions towards others and toward's God's created world take on a new kind of power that has the potential to shape the world order. If we can walk through life with our gaze set upon that love, those venomous snakes might just slither away. After all, my dad always told me about snakes, they are probably more afraid of us than we are of them. Amen.