

“Changing Our Gaze”

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Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:14-21

The men in my family have always had a fascination with snakes. When my parents were still married, my dad brought a snake home to the family as a pet. My mom sent it right back out the door. Later, when I would go with my dad, stepmom and siblings on family trips to the North Georgia mountains, sometimes we would see snakes. Once we saw one sunning itself across the lazy, country road, itself shaped like a snake. My dad stopped the car. He'd grab a tree branch and gently poke at the snake until it wrapped its body around the branch, assuring us that this king snake was not poisonous. Then he'd invite each of us 3 kids to say hello to the snake. With shivers of terror and squeals of delight, we each did: petting it, letting it wrap around our arm, and then watching it slither away after our dad gently tossed its heavy body into the woods on the side of the road.

My brother's interest in snakes took on a spiritual dimension. By the time he was about twelve, my dad and stepmom moved into a house that had a wooded backyard, and a railroad track that ran just behind it. My brother used to go exploring through the woods, following the train tracks, and he would bring back roadkill he found along the way. I promise, he was not-- and is not-- sadistic. He was more curious from a scientific perspective, plus he genuinely thought he could skin the hides and make clothing out of it, like the indigenous people he had been interested in learning about. He explained this reasoning when we discovered he had pinned a couple of animal hides to the roof so that the sun could tan them. It did not take him long to figure out that old roadkill-- or in this case, I guess we could call it rail-kill-- did not make for good hats or shoes.

But my brother kept his interest in the woods, and I think it became a refuge for him when his parents-- our dad, and my stepmother-- went through a divorce. One day, on one of his forest adventures, he was bitten by a copperhead snake. He made it home, and was rushed to the hospital, where he had to receive antivenom to counter the deadly poison of the snake. He still has the scar, and after the accident, he later told us that he always knew he would one day be bitten by a copperhead. We all questioned his foolishness in heading to the woods when he thought he would be bitten, but for my brother, he felt it was his *destiny*, and it seemed that this snake bite-- and surviving it-- marked my brother in a way that helped him spiritually, in his coming of age at a time when his parents were divorcing.

The Bible has a fascination with snakes, too. From the serpent in the Garden of Eden who lures Eve into eating the forbidden fruit, to the plague of serpents that God sends upon Pharaoh when he refused to give the Hebrews their freedom, to today's episode in Numbers when God sends swarms of poisonous snakes as a response to the Israelites' complaints about the conditions of

their freedom, snakes in the bible communicate something about the relationship about God, God's people, and freedom. For Eve, and through her, Adam, the snake's invitation to eat of the forbidden fruit opens them to the knowledge of good and evil, and from there they have a freedom to choose, right or wrong. For Pharaoh, his repeated refusal to give freedom to the enslaved Hebrews resulted in a plague of snakes, one of ten plagues God sent to convince Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go. And then those same Hebrews, once they were free in the wilderness, began to complain, and even to long for life under slavery-- the food was better and the water more plentiful. The snakes, with their poisonous bites, reminded the people that their freedom is never something to be lamented.

God's harsh message to the hungry Hebrews reminds me of the character Sethe, in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*-- which is fiction based on a true story. Sethe is a woman who has survived slavery; after enduring many cruel and dehumanizing acts-- so cruel, that when Schoolteacher, who is a slave-catcher, comes after Sethe and her children, she rushes them into the shed, and tries to kill them all. She succeeds in killing her eldest. On the outside, her behavior seems animal, even demonic. But as readers start to see from Sethe's perspective, they come to understand just how loving Sethe's act is; in fact, she calls the ghost of her daughter, "Beloved."

Yes, freedom is costly, and there are many dangers, toils and snares on the road to freedom. But God was not completely without grace towards these hungry, complaining Hebrews. When the people realized they were sinning against God in their complaints, and when Moses prayed to God, God told him to make a pole wrapped in the very thing that was killing the Hebrews-- the snake-- and that they could look upon it when they were bitten, and they would be saved.

God did not want the Hebrews to yearn for their enslavement. Instead of gazing backward, to the days of captivity under Pharaoh, God wanted to shift the Hebrews' gaze toward something else.

God does the same thing, with Jesus-- whom God also called "Beloved," at Jesus' baptism. John's gospel tells us that "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." God takes the very thing that threatens to consume the people-- a symbol of Empire, of captivity, of torture, of death-- and makes it the thing that frees them, frees us. Using the cross, which had been a symbol of death, God makes it a symbol for life. It is hard, from our perspective, to understand how this is love. I know there are modern-day crucifixions; look at the killings of trans women, and you will know that the practice of crucifixion, with all its torture and political messaging meant to reach far beyond the victim, still exists. When we see the hunting and shooting of Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year old black man out for a run, by people who believe to their core that black people on "their" neighborhood streets *must* be criminals, and we see the ripples of trauma this causes in black and brown communities that find this story all too familiar, we know that crucifixion still exists. During Lent especially, God calls us to look honestly at this brokenness and how we have been part of it.

In love, God causes us to change our gaze so that we can look straight into what is broken, hurting, and what is causing death in our world-- whether that is within us, or outside of us. It is not without looking directly at it, that we can be transformed.

During this time of COVID, we have had moments when we have had to shift our gaze. John's gospel speaks of a judgment, of a light that comes into the world to expose evil deeds. Sometimes we have shifted to see evils we may not have recognized before, evils like the widening gaps of the have and the have nots. We have had to open our eyes to the systemic racism in our criminal justice system. We have had to open our eyes to the ways our patterns of behavior may protect or harm others, as we all try to keep safe and human during a pandemic. Even as we have been isolated, we have had much cause to look beyond ourselves.

Shifting that gaze has also changed how we see the nearer patterns of our lives. As we have been forced to look squarely at the dangers of a deadly pandemic, we have-- as much as possible-- kept a smaller footprint. I spoke with one parent yesterday who said he has realized that many of the things that keep him busy are, in fact, optional-- and he has used this pandemic period to focus on what-- to him-- he's come to realize does not feel optional: spending quality time with his family.

As for the hungry Hebrews, God may have punished their moaning in the wilderness when they wanted better and more plentiful food and water, and we can have compassion for them. At the beginning of the pandemic, we all felt the gripping fear of scarcity. However, we have also learned to change our gaze from stocking up on a monthly supply of groceries and a *yearly* supply of toilet paper, to looking outward, to notice how hungry our neighbors might be. We have given extra money to feeding programs like Center for Food Action and Our Community Dinner Table, and today you'll hear more about the Presbyterian Hunger Program when Vicky Li gives her testimony. In the wilderness of this pandemic, we have realized that we can live more simply than we ever imagined we could; if we can then share the leftover of what we did not need, we would surely have fewer physically and spiritually hungry neighbors.

"For God so loved the world." I close my sermon with this phrase, though it is likely the most familiar of the gospel passage we have read, and so the first to jump out at you. People either love it or hate it. "...*So loved* the world that God gave the only son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." The people who don't love this verse always hear the implicit judgment in it; as if to say, but those who *don't* believe, will perish.

Here's what I think: our lives will bring us through the wilderness. We may find serpents. We may feel famished or parched. We may see evil, or even perpetuate it ourselves. We will fear we may perish. But the eternal life Jesus offers comes through shifting our gaze. Our hunger and thirst don't define us. The sting of the serpent doesn't define us. The evil we are part of does not define us. Even death does not define us... because God's love defines us. And in that love, we become part of something eternal. In that love, there is abundance. In that love, there *is* life.

