

“A Poisonous Atmosphere”

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Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:14-21

Have you ever tried to get anything done in a poisonous atmosphere? Many of you know that I just completed three years of leadership in our Presbytery. And for the last two years I was working with a man who was extremely intelligent, responsible and effective and whenever he did something, he got results. You'd think it would be a pleasure to work with someone like that, and in some ways it was. We got a lot done. The problem was, this person also liked to dominate every conversation, and he usually sounded angry and judgmental. He also took an immediate dislike to me. It felt like whenever I opened my mouth or did anything, if it wasn't exactly what he wanted me to do or say, it would be met with a disapproving look, a snarky remark, or complete ridicule. He was often right, or at least half-right in what he wanted. But it was a difficult atmosphere to work in, and I often found myself tongue tied, and reluctant to say or do anything. And I'm not the only one who felt that way.

Have you ever tried to live or work in a poisonous atmosphere? Maybe it's someone you live with, or someone at work or at school who always puts the worst spin on whatever you say or do, or is always judging you or picking fights. It's hard to thrive in a situation like that.

In the story Jane read today from the book of Numbers, God's people were poisoning the atmosphere with complaints. The story takes place while the Hebrew people were wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. It was a time of transition, after they miraculously escaped slavery in Egypt, and before they entered the Promised Land. During those 40 years they experienced all sorts of hardships. And they had no idea when it would end, or whether any of them would make it out alive.

The biggest worry was about food and water. They couldn't always find it when they wanted it, and they were sick and tired of the same old food when they did find it. But rather than making the best of a difficult situation, they grumbled and complained. It's one thing to raise questions and talk about concerns. But if *all* the news is negative, it poisons the atmosphere. And this was serious complaining. There were times Moses was afraid the people would stone him to death (14:10).

So in the midst of these complaints and fears, suddenly the people were attacked by poisonous snakes, and many of them died. No one had died of hunger or thirst. But now they were dying of snake bites. So they figured God must be punishing them for their negativity. They confessed their sin to Moses and asked Moses to pray for them, that God would take the snakes away.

You might expect this story to end: “And God took away the snakes.” But that's not how it ended. Instead, God told Moses to do something strange: make an image of a

poisonous snake out of bronze, stick it on a pole, and when people were bitten, they should look at the bronze snake on a pole, and they would live. What is that about? Some kind of pagan magic?

Actually the ancient Egyptians did practice some kind of serpent magic. And the ancient Greeks had something similar. The Greek god of healing and medicine, Asclepius, carried a snake on a rod. Why a snake? Snakes shed their skin every year, so it could be the snake symbolized renewal or rejuvenation. But ancient people may also have known that the poison from a snake could kill, while an extract of that same poison could bring healing or provide the antidote for a deadly bite. It's interesting that the Greek word *pharmakon* was used to mean either a "drug," or "medicine," or "poison." A little bit of venom, or drugs or medicine can bring healing. Too much will kill you.

Up until this point in the story, when the people complained about not having water, God found them water. And when they complained about not having food, God sent quails and bread from heaven. So when they complained about the snakes, wouldn't you think God would just get rid of the snakes? I don't know anyone who would like to live with poisonous snakes crawling around freely. It kind of gives you the creeps! But the snakes could be a reminder to the Hebrew people. If the snakes kept biting, the people would have to keep looking up, and remember the danger of their poisonous attitudes. And looking up they would also remember God, the God who delivered them from Egypt, and was guiding them through the wilderness.

Today Tom read from the gospel of John, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." This is part of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, where Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee, visited Jesus secretly at night, and Jesus told him he must be born again, or born from above. When Nicodemus asked, "How can these things be?" Jesus chided him for not believing. He reminded him of Moses and the serpent, then he said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life."

This verse is one of the most often quoted verses in the Bible, a statement of God's love for the world. It's especially meaningful when spoken to Nicodemus, who was a good and faithful Jew. God does not just love good faithful Jews, those who might feel entitled to God's love. God loves *the world*. But the rest of the message can poison the atmosphere of this love if we're not careful. It goes on to say, "those who do not believe are condemned already ..." and "This is the judgment, that light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."

Is this a word of promise, or of judgment? Many people today reject the message of the gospel because they believe Christians are self-righteous and judgmental. Certainly some Christians present the message that way. And our translation of the Bible seems to support it: "Those who do not believe are condemned." But *we* don't judge people for not believing, and neither does God. There is a word in the Greek, *katakrino*,

which means to judge negatively or to condemn. But that's not the actual word used in this passage. The word used here is simply *krino*, which means to separate or divide.*

You could say that those who don't believe are "separated." But it's not God who separates them. People separate themselves. It's not a question of believing certain doctrines about God or Jesus, or passing a test of orthodoxy. It's about the path we choose to take in life. Do we choose to walk with God, or away from God? Are we willing to look beyond ourselves and enter into a life-giving relationship with God? Or do we look to ourselves only, or at the ground?

Later in the service today we will have prayers for healing and wholeness. When we ask for prayers for healing, we don't *always* get what we pray for. But when we pray, we always get a relationship with God that brings light and life into our lives.

When the Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness, God did not take the snakes away. But the people found healing by raising the snake out of its natural context, taking it off the ground and looking at it in the light of God. A snake on a pole was a way for people to recognize the poisonous atmosphere they contributed to, to name their problems and fears, and remember that God was with them. And that brought healing.

Sometimes the poison in our lives comes from negative attitudes and sin. But sometimes it's just part of the suffering of life. Hunger and thirst are part of life in the desert, just as people today suffer illness or hardship through no fault of their own. And when we pray to God, it doesn't necessarily magically disappear. But we can lift everything up and look at it in the light of God. And God so loves each and everyone one of us, that God offers us God's very own self in Jesus Christ. So the Son of Man is lifted up for us to look upon. And when we look to Jesus, the light of the world, in his suffering and his love we see what it means to be fully human. And we find strength and inspiration to get beyond ourselves, and are lifted into God's healing and life-giving presence.

So may we lift up our poison, our illnesses, our hardships, our needs to the light of God. And may God guide us as we walk along through the wilderness of our lives. Amen.

* credit to Brian Stoffregen in "John 3.14-21 4th Sunday in Lent – Year B" at <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john3x14.htm>.