

## “Snake Bites, Sounds Bites, and a Faith that Lasts”

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

March 10, 2024

---

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. If John’s gospel had not quoted Jesus referencing this story, it would have been forgotten like much of the book of Numbers has been forgotten. 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” (do you catch the humor there?). They spoke out against Moses, and against 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 and melodrama. 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 need 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 in John's gospel 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.

If you've been coming to the church since last summer, you may have been one to have witnessed the toddler Jimmy's first steps; he was only about 8 or 9 months at the time. I think his first steps might have happened while we were on retreat at Camp Johnsonburg. You'd see him at first wobbling on his two legs, bouncing a little. It wasn't long after that when you would see that if his mom or dad sat a few feet in front of him, he would lean forward and those wobbly legs would step their way right toward his loving parent. Having that loved one-- or maybe one of the older, fascinating church kids on the retreat-- in front of him gave him the joyful incentive to forget his 9 months of immobility and the realities of gravity, and just... go for it. I remember when my daughter was learning how to roller skate. At first, when she took off in front of me while I stood behind, she looked down at the cracks on the sidewalk, the neighbors passing by, or over her shoulder to see what I was doing. Inevitably, she crashed. However, when I stood far in front of her, a joyful smile would spread across her face as she glided on her skates towards me and did not fall, arriving safely into my arms with fits of laughter.

Jesus lifted on the cross— like the serpent on the staff— becomes that beacon that helps us to focus on love, life, and salvation, rather than the dangers, toils, and snares threatening to topple us.

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 sound bite, a pithy statement on a sign at a baseball game, a boasting line, to separate the salvation of those who believe from the condemnation of those who don't. To me, however, 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 a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then...know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit 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. As we hear of people dying of literal starvation in Gaza, we know that danger and vulnerability still slithers around us. Sometimes these dangers are of our own making. What are the venomous snakes in your life?

Cole Arthur Riley, in her book *This Here Flesh* we are reading during our Wednesday Study Class, says, "Ask fifty people what they are afraid of and see how many say heights or spiders and how few have the presence of self to say they are afraid of abandonment or a deteriorating mind." It's not to say that when

you are in the wilderness, fear of a serpent bite *isn't* a legitimate thing. But it is much easier to focus our fears on things like spiders and snakes, because naming our deeper fears of death, abandonment– or even becoming the free people God calls us to be– feels too hard to utter, even before God. Still, they are there.

But we may find it easier to utter these unspeakable fears to Jesus, who encountered the wilderness and its threats. He knew the grumblings of hunger. He knew the venom of betrayal. At times, he trembled before his difficult calling, telling God, “If it is your will, take this cup from me.” He even came to know the experience of death.

In the intimacy of that knowledge, Jesus knows the peculiar sufferings of our lives and of the world, too. Sometimes, just knowing that someone else knows what we hold gives us the faith to make it through another day, another week, another year, until we find that God gives us more than what we need to survive. God gives us what we need to be transformed.

May we approach the cross 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 even the broken things, the dangerous things, the fearful things can be transformed into something new and life-giving. If we can walk through life with our gaze set upon God’s love, those venomous snakes might just slither away. After all, as my dad always told me about snakes, they are probably more afraid of us than we are of them. Amen.