

**Look to the Snake (Lent 4)** Num 21:4-9;  
Ps 107:1-3, 17-22; Eph 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

How would you describe Israel's time in the wilderness – in one word or one sentence?

What did they say & do over and over?

They constantly said, "Wouldn't it be better if we went back to slavery in Egypt?" They grumbled, complained & rebelled – repeatedly! Each time God's patience was tested and he reacted. The generation that were rescued from slavery in Egypt didn't get into the Promised Land and wandered in the wilderness 40 years.

Browse through the book of Numbers and see how often the slaves, freed by an act of God, choose whining over trust and gratefulness. Here are a few lowlights. In Numbers 11, God sent fire when they complained. In chapter 12, Miriam and Aaron, two of the leaders began to talk against Moses. God gave Miriam leprosy.

In Numbers 14, when the spies returned from Canaan, the people choose to take on the attitude of 10 of the 12 and grumbled, "Let's choose a leader and go back to Egypt." Plus they wanted to stone the two spies who said God had given us that land, please don't rebel. God's patience ran out. He wanted to kill all of them, but Moses talked him out of it. In chapter 16, three men, with 250 others, led a rebellion. God caused the earth to swallow them up.

This pattern repeats itself over and over during Israel's 40 years in the wilderness. People were ungrateful. God punished them and kept showing his care for them through water, food, protection, guidance, giving laws on how to live together, & instructions on how to worship him. What a bunch of unappreciative, thankless and unpleasant people!

But we can understand worrying about the lack of certainty around water, food & the hardship of camping in the desert. They wondered how God was actually going to give the Promised Land to Israel – because it already had

inhabitants who didn't want to leave. But isn't anything better than brutal slavery?

During the second Boer War, 1899-1902, between the British Empire and some Dutch immigrants, a man was convicted by the British of a very unusual crime. He was found guilty of being a "discourager." The South African town of Ladysmith was under attack by the Boers. This traitor would move up and down the lines of soldiers who were defending the city and do everything he could to discourage them. He would point out the enemy's strength, the difficulty of defending against them, and the inevitable capture of the city. He didn't use a gun in his attack. It wasn't necessary. His weapon was the power of discouragement – just like the Israelites seemed to constantly do.

Israel's discontent was directed at Moses – but they were really unhappy with Almighty God. That's a dangerous attitude to have. Each time people acted on their discouragement, or lack of faith, God was both reactive and merciful. It's strange that the people seemed to have rose colored positive memories about their time as slaves in Egypt. But, I can resonate with being tired of wandering around the wilderness and asking – Are we there yet?

In our story, the people grew impatient, spoke against God and Moses, & complained – again. So God sent venomous snakes among them. Did they think of the plagues the Egyptians experienced when the Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go? Or the serpent in the Garden?

What a strange story! How many of you like snakes? I had a science project about the snakes of Taiwan. I went down to the market and bought the three most poisonous snakes Taiwan had – not for food or making wine – but to put into formaldehyde. I won a prize at the science fair. But I still don't like snakes. They are too dangerous to mess with.

One of my mission bosses lived in a village in north east South American during World War II. She had pictures of an anaconda skin,

stretched out, beside a building. It was longer than that building, and the 11 people, standing side by side, holding up the snake skin.

Here is bad advice on what to do when you are attacked by an anaconda snake, the largest snake in the world. It's in the family with the boa constrictor, but it is larger than that. They can grow to be 35 feet long and can weigh about 400 pounds. Here is what to do if you meet up with an anaconda snake.

1. If you are attacked by an anaconda, do not run. The snake is faster than you are.
2. Lie flat on the ground. Put your arms tight against your sides, your legs tight together.
3. Tuck in your chin. Do not panic.
4. The snake will come and begin to nudge and begin to climb over your body.
5. Do not panic.
6. After the snake has examined you, it will begin to swallow you from the feet in, always from the feet in. Permit the snake to swallow your feet and ankles. Do not panic.
7. The snake will now begin to suck your legs into its body. You must lie perfectly still. This will take a long time. Do not panic.
8. When the snake reaches your knees, slowly and with as little movement as possible, reach down and take out your knife and very gently slide it between the edge of the snake's mouth and your leg. Then suddenly rip upwards severing the snake's head.
9. Be sure to have your knife with you.
10. Be sure your knife is sharp.

Reality is – we can outrun anacondas. But, because life is full of “anacondas” of different types – temptations of every kind – so when we come upon one of these “snakes” don't just

lie down and wait to be eaten, hoping you have a knife that's going to be sharp enough to save you...RUN! And do everything in your power to avoid the snakes of discontent & grumbling.

Let's break down this snake story from the book of Numbers. **First** the people became impatient with Moses & God. This grumbling, complaining, rebellious, discontented and discouraging talk was a habit of theirs. **Second**, God's patience burst into impatient anger because of Israel's lack of trust in him. **Third**, he sent poisonous snakes to kill the people.

**Fourth**, many of the Israelites are killed by the snake bites. **Fifth**, the people repented and plead with Moses to intercede on their behalf. They recognized their sin. **Sixth**, Moses did intercede. **Seventh**, God instructed him to make a serpent of bronze and put it on a pole. **Eighth**, all who looked at the bronze snake were healed. Its ironic Moses made a replica of precisely what was killing the people.

One of the most difficult questions this story clearly raises is that of the character of God. What kind of God is this who inflicts death on people for their lack of trust? But, remember how graceful and active God has been on their behalf, and ours. God had covenanted himself – a number of times to look out and care for his people. But their lack of faith was a violation of God's expectant response to his commitment to them. So God demonstrated they were worthy of punishment. What's happened is the exodus generation was being weeded out and replaced by a new generation.

It seems the book of Numbers is coming to terms that the old generation will not see God's promises come to fruition. On this long, boring, dangerous journey, they simply did not reach the destination. Too much grumbling?

In this day of grace based preaching, and our demands that God be loving, we do have a hard time understanding and accepting who God is. But I think one reason we have these stories in the Bible is to remind us, don't do what Israel

and God's creatures in the time of Noah, and at the tower of Babel did. If God were fair, he would destroy more of us, more frequently than occurs. Because people kind, keep making the same mistakes and sins. We expect God to give us what we demand. Our discontentedness and grumbling leads us away from a holy God. We simply have to accept our Creator as Yahweh is The Almighty loves us, but for fellowship and peace to occur, between us & God & between us humans, there are some basic expectations, thinking, rules and habits necessary. Or there are some natural consequences because of evil.

**Ninth**, because the Almighty had covenanted himself, he did provide a remedy - again. It's important to note God did not remove the snakes, but provided a means for healing in the midst of danger. God brought healing precisely where the sting was the worst. **Tenth**, the people had to look up to the bronze serpent to be healed. They still got bitten; that danger didn't go away, although God did offer healing if they looked in the right direction. But there was no magical process for healing – just look!

We have to ask: Is it coincidence that snakes are the source of death for the faithless? Is it coincidence that the disobedient were denied the Land of Promise & are reduced to another link in the genetic chain leading from the Fall, Adam and Eve, slavery, to the Incarnation?

What about God's sign to Moses when he was called out by God to lead? He was told to throw his shepherd's staff on the ground and it turned into a snake. Later, in front of Pharaoh, Aaron's staff become a snake and ate the Pharaohs' magicians' staffs they had turned into snakes.

I suspect God choose a bronze replica of a serpent, to tie together and remind Israel, of the events in Garden of Eden, his rescuing Israel from slavery, and their behavior in the wilderness. But he still was hanging with them! What do we make of the failure of the exodus generation to reach the Promised Land? The lack of faith they exhibited in the wilderness, rendered them unfit to inhabit the land. But

what is remarkable about the Israelites is the fact that the next generation continued the journey! They went on. Like you and I are expected to. And we invite and encourage others to join this journey with our Savior.

There is another snake connection for the Israelites than simply fear of snakes. Snakes were seen not just as the enemy but also as symbols of protection and power. The pharaoh in Egypt often wore a head piece that displayed a hooded cobra. The snake was there to protect the pharaoh, and to spit venom at his enemies should they try to hurt him. So was God asking the Israelites – which snake power do you want to depend on? Pharaoh or Me? The one who oppressed you or the one who frees you? Satan the deceiver or Me who sustains you?

Ancient people realized the irony in snakes. The venom found in snakes is the source of medicine by which snake bites can be healed. So the symbol of snakes is used today by the Canadian Medical Association. Why? Well, if any of you have ever had surgery, you “know that if you get mixed up with these people who work under the symbol of two snakes twined on a staff, they often hurt you in order to make you whole. Keep that thought in mind.

This really is a strange story. But God links his history with humans in a way that leads from the sin of deception in the Garden, Pharaoh's sin of oppression, the incarnation & the empty tomb. It sounds like blasphemy to say that Jesus is like a snake. But Jesus makes that comparison with Nicodemus. He said, “And 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,” because we are dead in our sins.

Nicodemus was trying to figure out who Jesus was and so Jesus used a comparison that was familiar to him. Jesus may have thought of this story because of the way Nicodemus went to see him... at night, slithering in quietly under cover, not wanting anyone to know he had come to see the controversial Galilean. As a

religious leader he should have quickly picked up on all the irony and connections.

The Spirit of God cannot just brush away sin, but he grants new birth. For sin to be dealt with, the Almighty's justice must be satisfied. So God sent the Son of Man, Jesus, to be lifted up to satisfy God's wrath on behalf of sinners who look to the cross, believe in and follow him. It's important to notice the connections and similarities between the Old and New Testaments. They are not just coincidences.

This snake story brings out a great contrast between religion and following Jesus. Religion either ignores human sin, or says God overlooks our sin, or that good works and penance can pay for our sins. The Good News is, God cannot dismiss sin, or he would not be holy and just, plus we cannot take care of our own sins.

But God provides us with Jesus, his Son. God's provision of healing is that even in our worst failures and disappointments, God provides. God offers healing for our wounds, anxieties, relationship for our loneliness, and faithfulness for our faithlessness. God doesn't remove the sources of our suffering, but God makes the journey with us, providing what we most deeply need, if we but look in the right direction. Praise be to God who sticks to his covenant commitment! The cross of Christ is sufficient for each of us! We are invited to look up to the cross Jesus died on for healing, life and salvation.