

Snakes, Sin, and the Love of God
Numbers 21.4-9, John 3.14-21
Lent 4B
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Somewhere in my childhood, I was spending a week in Talladega, Alabama, at the Shocco Springs Baptist Conference Center. In an afternoon program, we were learning tips for finding books of the bible very quickly in preparation for sword drills. Hold the bible spine down with both thumbs centered over the edge of the pages. Pull open at that spot, and you should be in the psalms. Return to the closed position. Move your thumb to the edge of the pages, that will get you to Matthew. Turn your thumb on its tip, and your nail should catch right in the epistles. The contests that followed were meant to teach children how to expertly and swiftly move through scripture in hopes that they might grow to study the words on their own. Of course the *big* verses, the favorite ones, the select ones were set aside to be memorized at camp, in Sunday School, in mission activities, in youth group. Along with Psalm 23 and the Roman Roads, church leaders hoped to etch these words on our hearts. Today we come to a verse that is on most everyone's short list of verses to know.

If you didn't grow up with sword drills and memory verse contests, you likely still know this verse because of sporting events. Men paint it on their chests or hold signs in the end zones to wave before cameras, "John 3:16." It's meant by the sign wavers as a mark of one's faith, evangelism to those who do not believe, and summary of the entirety of scripture.

If you, like me, learned it in the church as a young child, then you likely also learned it in the King James Version. Say it with me, if you remember those words: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." John 3:16

As we now know as adults, these memorized passages of scripture have a framework and a history that surround them. The readings before us this morning gift us with the opportunity to look at these words in a larger context than an end zone shout out.

In the dozen verses leading to Jesus' speech, Nicodemus has come to Jesus by cover of darkness. He is a key religious leader and a man with much to lose. He is not ready to risk his reputation by being seen with this teacher who had rapidly developed a reputation for miracles and actions that pointed to God's power. But Nicodemus is curious. And he believes there's something powerful about who Jesus is. He is drawn to Jesus in the darkness.

Jesus and Nicodemus talk about what it means to be connected to God as the divine source, what it means to live and move by God's Spirit, what it means to be born for a

second time. This is not the way Nicodemus teaches or understands his journey to God. So he asks Jesus, "How can these things be?" To which Jesus replies, "You are a teacher of the faith, and yet you do not understand these things?" You do not understand that God is present to us just as the wind whirls around us?

John then shifts from this conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus to a speech Jesus gives as a silent Nicodemus listens. Jesus is unsure Nicodemus is capable of understanding things he cannot see, so he reminds him of an ancient story, "Just as Moses raised up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of man must be lifted up...for God so loved the world."

Let me tell you, when we were running sword drills and memorizing scripture at Shocco Springs, our thumbs never landed on Numbers 21. The passage has given me fits all week as I have read and reread the text. I've read it with the pastoral staff, discussed it with my husband, and spent time in conversation with Rabbi Cohn of Temple Sinai as I have worked with this picture of a God who punishes the very people he seeks to save by tossing poisonous snakes into their paths.

The Israelites have been wandering in the wilderness long enough that they have forgotten their freedom is a gift. They've been eating the same food long enough that they feel they may as well have nothing to eat at all. So they complain. They criticize. They are angry and tired and feel certain their Egyptian enslavement was a better life than their wandering.

Complaining to God, questioning God, and even criticizing God are not punishable offenses in scripture. Yet something happens in this ancient text with these ancient people that gives birth to fiery serpents at their feet. It seems to me the problem is not in their lament but in their forgetfulness. They have forgotten the acts of God. They have forgotten that God has listened to their voices and provided for their needs. Their complaint and criticism is an over-reach of their humanity, and they are skeptical God knows what God is doing.

Facing the consequence of their sin, the Israelites repent. They turn back to God and cry out for help. God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent to lift up for the people to look upon to be healed.

Rachel Hackenberg writes, "the only solution to the infestation is to look directly at the serpents, to name the poison, to gaze honestly at the plague, and to own up to the sins and doubts that brought the serpents into their midst.

To be healed, the people have to see the source of death.

To be restored, they have to repent of their death-perpetuating behaviors.

To return to fullness of life, they have to remember what they would prefer to forget: not only their loud complaining against God and Moses, but also the brutal pain of life in Egypt. And more than that, they have to remember what it is so easy to forget: that God's

grace is abundant and unearned ([Ephesians 2:1-10](#)), that God's salvation ([Psalm 107:19](#)) comes from the wellspring of God's love and not from condemnation ([John 3:14-21](#)).

To be healed, we have to recognize the source of death, even if it is ourselves."¹

Moses and John tell us that God's way is to provide a way out and a way forward that we might have life. In John, Jesus tells Nicodemus that if he ever wants to know real life, he has to die to the old one and be born to a new one. Nicodemus can't figure out what in the world Jesus is talking about with this ridiculous way of looking at things. So Jesus points back to a story he knows Nicodemus will understand.

Do you remember when the Israelites didn't trust God to be who God promised to be? Do you remember when they didn't believe God would give them exactly what they needed tomorrow just like God gave them what they needed for today? And the more they complained and doubted and criticized, the worse their lives got until finally they were snake bit and terrified? What happened next, Nicodemus? Everything got really quiet as the two of them looked at each other in the dark room. The disciples sat at the edge of the shadows and the edge of their seats as they waited for Jesus. Finally, Jesus spoke. God made a way for them to be healed. God made a way for them to be made new. Follow me, and your life begins again. Because God so loves the world, Nicodemus. That means you and your elite friends and everyone else, too. The ones you let in and the ones you keep out. The ones who know you are here and the ones you were terrified might see you meeting with me. God loves. God makes a way. God heals. God renews.

It's an ancient way of thinking and storytelling to credit God with providing the poison that infects us. As we know all too well, we do a pretty good job of rendering that service already. We know that often times we poison ourselves, and sometimes we poison each other. Sometimes the same snake bites us over and over again, and we foolishly keep walking right back to it thinking it won't bite this time; we can tame it and keep it close even though we know it's the very thing keeping us from living the real life that is right before us. Whatever that thing or that practice or that relationship is that takes away life, it's like being surrounded by vipers.

Nicodemus doesn't understand that his inability to love as God loves is like a poisonous snake biting at his heels. And his sin-filled, snake-bitten self is in desperate need of an anti-venom that only God can provide. By looking into the face of Jesus himself, Nicodemus is offered the way forward, the way out, the way beyond the snakes.

"John 3:16 is first a word to Nicodemus," writes Karoline Lewis. "And Nicodemus, a man, a Pharisee, a leader used to [advantage and elite status] needs to hear that God loves the world. And so do the disciples, which is why in the very next chapter Jesus then takes them to the world, to a small town in...Samaria, so that they can meet *who* the world is.

¹ <http://revgalblogpals.org/2015/03/10/revised-common-lectionary-of-snakes-and-sin/>

Because the world may very well be the last place -- and the last person -- on earth we think God would love."²

God loves the world. God wants life for the world. God lifts up Jesus as a way out of death and back to life. In fact, it's just a few chapters later that Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." When our gaze has dropped and we begin to forget, when the fiery serpents emerge and threaten to take that abundant life, we are called back again to look up again, to see God's way again.

This awareness happens just as much in the mundane as it does in the grand crises of life. Last week Courtney Martin wrote for On Being about what it looks like when our gaze drops and we begin to forget about life. In a piece called "All That Conspires to Help Us Thrive," she describes the way her babysitter, her husband, her friends, her neighbors surround her with support and kindness that makes her life possible. Yet, "Too often," she writes, "I focus on what is broken — the slow line at the post office and my cell phone always on the fritz. I'd actually spent much of Saturday afternoon yelling at my printer. I anthropomorphized the thing: 'How could it let me down like this? What nerve!' I thought as I restarted it again and again, growing angrier and angrier.

What nerve, indeed. What nerve to have the whole world basically conspire for your thriving and then lose your mind over one little thing not giving you exactly what you need in the exact moment that you demand it. Now that, my friends, is nerve."³

Scripture tells us that God is conspiring for shalom: peace, thriving, abundant life. When we are grasping for our own security, lost in the minutia of our days, keeping our heads down out of fear or stress, failing to love ourselves and failing to love each other, we have forgotten that God so loves the world. We have forgotten that God is present as the wind. We have forgotten that God hears our voices crying out. How have we missed the message? How are we overlooking God's invitation? As we sit with Nicodemus in the Lenten darkness this morning, may we ask ourselves: What "snakiness" within us keeps us from being fully alive?

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=3550>

³ <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/all-that-conspires-to-help-us-thrive/7380>