

“Exactly This Way”
Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:4-21
Lent 4 B
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We have in this season a number of stories about God’s dealing with his friends.¹ There are many rough spots in these friendships, and just as many gracious endings. This is a different kind of friendship. It is established by the promise of God and guarantees no exceptions. This sort of friendship guarantees only a kind of continuing education in what could be called “God’s idiom.” God’s idiom is a way of speaking and acting in which grace happens in the midst of suffering, power in weakness, and resurrection brings forth the dead.

In this week’s installment the people of the Hebrews are delivered from snakes. I have never been especially afraid of snakes because I haven’t been around many of them. When I interned in the high desert in California – about midway between Death Valley and Mount Whitney – a friend and I would climb “B” Mountain before sunrise on the Naval Weapons Center. Before sunrise was about the only time it was cool enough to do it. It was also the time when the sidewinder rattlesnakes would be active.

If we timed it right we would reach the top of the mountain at just about the time the sun would slice over the eastern horizon. It was beautiful. Now was the dangerous part, once the sun was finally up and we were running and walking down through the rocks and sand of “B” Mountain. As it began to warm up was the time the snakes would be out. It wasn’t the snakes you could see that were dangerous, it was the snakes you didn’t see. Placing your foot over a rock you might startle one and suddenly you’d be in big trouble.

As we ran the last half-mile over the alluvial fan that circled B Mountain like a skirt around most of the mountain, you could spot the “j” patterns in the sand. Just like many j’s stacked up on each other, that was the sign of the sidewinders. The only thing that creeped me out more was the black widow spiders and the scorpions at the church. The desert was both beautiful and dangerous.

The story from Numbers begins with complaining. God sends snakes as a kind of reprisal for the people’s continual griping. Friendships in God’s idiom.

What kind of God is this? Like an eager friend this God insists on giving himself freely, unconditionally, holding nothing back. But when the suffering begins *then* he holds back permitting what appears to be a self-guided tour of misery. Like a game of a cat with a mouse,

¹ The language in the next seven paragraphs is James Arne Nestingen, “The Lenten First Lessons, *Word and World*, Volume 5, Number 1 (1985), 90-95.

or so Luther quipped.² And in the midst of that game, here is a gospel that is richer than a generalized policy of tolerance.

The people were more than impatient. They were short of breath, running out of stamina necessary to get through this sandbox of a wilderness. There is a petulant tone to the peoples' murmurings. Even supernatural food is revolting to them. But I can't blame them, can you? It seems God's idiom is a continual struggle of hope with hopelessness, faith and sheer unbelief.

God's response is that God becomes both the enemy and redeemer. The snakes run loose against the people in punishment. God does not take them away. At the same time God provides a bronze snake that saves. Looking up the people see a cursed snake, and it heals them. So fixed were they on the image of the snake that they are oblivious to God's action beyond the snake. This is a troubling story. Do you see where this is heading?

As Jesus prefigures in the gospel of John, we too are heading towards something lifted up. Now it is the son of man who is to be lifted up. His image is loathsome and revolting. This Good Friday image will bring a sense of panic, and we will all want to run away. Some will be so offended that they will remove crosses from churches. From our vantage point we cannot probably tell in this lifting up if God is our enemy or our friend.

This lifted up death has the clear capacity to offend us because it seems to reverse the salvation we expected God to bring. It conflicts with all that is rational and humane. We wanted God to be associated with the highest good, with something lovable. And all we get is the cross.

Luther boldly announced that Christ is "our Serpent of salvation."³ He ties the knot between Jesus and the snake.

Luther's contemporary, Hans Bauldung Grien, does the same in a woodcut of St. John the Evangelist by putting the snake in the chalice of Communion, mingling snake and the blood of Christ.⁴

It is very hard not to be offended here. A snake doesn't look like the right thing to gaze at to be saved from snakebite. And the cross surely doesn't look like the right place to go for help. "Christ crucified offends us by crossing our path and thwarting our hopes and dreams" God makes all this too difficult and "hurts our feelings." We are looking for an easier way of salvation and God does not provide it.⁵ This is all so backwards. The "help looks like a torment, the relief like a burden."⁶ Beautiful Savior turns out to be this ugly Jesus.⁷ Why does it have to be *this way*?

² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-76),

³ *LW* 22:340.

⁴ Ronald F. Marshall, "Our Serpent of Salvation: The Offense of Jesus in John's Gospel, *Word and World*, Volume XXI, Number 4 (Fall, 2001), pp. 388-389.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: University of Princeton, 1991), 114.

Looking beyond the offensive snake to the Lamb of God is no small feat. We are on the lookout for signs of snakes so that we can avoid them, because they scare us. The cross scares us.

To see past the offensive snake to the Lamb of God will take a certain poverty on our part. In the process we will take leave of reason, good sense, beauty, and pride. If we are to get past this snake Jesus high and lifted up we will have to admit our own spiritual blindness. In the writer's words, even our virtues will have to be burned away.⁸ We will have to give ourselves over to him taking no account of our lives.

At that point we may just see past the snake of God to the Lamb of God.

And next comes one of the most comforting texts in the Bible. You probably learned it as a child. "For God so loved the world. . ." The "so" in that phrase, *houtos* in the Greek, is "in the sense of 'just so,' or 'in this way,' or the more archaic, 'thusly.'" The verse could be translated, "This is exactly the way God loved the world, and the result was that he gave his own son, in order that whoever believes in *him* should not perish but have eternal life."⁹ The snake and Jesus, one and the same. *This* is the way God saves the world.

And here is the really strange thing. Some will recognize in that lifting up an action of mercy so deep and great that it heals and saves and makes whole. This mercy will restore friendship with God.

Do you see where this season is headed? Like the people in Numbers, we have already been bitten.¹⁰ Once God saved the people by having them gaze on the snake. Now, God would save the people by having them gaze in belief on the Son, lifted up. *This* is the way God loved the world. Amen.

⁷ "Be as far as Jesus Christ is concerned, certainly no one can say that he first became acquainted with him when he had come on high; for everyone who has learned to know him learns to know him in his lowliness." Kierkegaard, p. 172.

⁸ Mary Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation," *Collected Works* (Library of America, 1988), p. 654.

⁹ Sarah Henrich, "John 3:14-21," at www.workingpreacher.org/preaching_print.aspx?commentary_id=263

¹⁰ *Ibid.*