

Rev. Adrienne Meier

**March 17, 2021, Midweek Service for the Fourth Week in Lent
St. Thomas Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana**

Something About the Snakes

Numbers 21: 4-9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "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." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

The Israelites are wandering the desert, and things are pretty much not great. The water situation is sketchy at best and they're tired of always eating the same weird manna. But then, there's the snakes. Something about the snakes is completely different from the sand, the thirst, and the weird food. Something about the snakes leads the people from their usual complaining and cajoling and into confession. Something about the snakes seems insurmountable and completely hopeless to the people. But then, there's something about the snakes, that God doesn't just deliver the people from their problem, ending the snakes for once and for all, but somehow, through insurmountable hopelessness, God gives the people life.

The Episcopal priest and scholar Barbara Brown Taylor has a story in her book, *An Altar in the World*, about a horrible, pain-filled night after she sustained an injury to her eye. She writes about how she prayed and pleaded with God: "I prayed the kind of prayers I never thought I would pray. I began the kind of bargaining with God that I do not even believe in, and when that did not work I called God's honor into question. I begged God to do something. I dared God to do something." Sounds like Israel: complaining, cajoling, and confessing God into action.

I remember my own dark nights, pleading that the inevitable would not come to pass. I don't mean the many nights, partially sleepless while I worry about the many things that will not happen. I keep a quote by Calvin Coolidge for those moments. He said, "If you see ten troubles coming down the road, you can be sure that nine will run into the ditch before they reach you." Those moments are best handled by thanking the worries for their instructions and then letting them go until their presence proves necessary. I don't mean nights like that. I mean the nights where I'd really screwed the pooch and need to make

amends the next day. I mean the nights the loved one won't make it through and all the grieving nights that followed. I mean the nights where we all stayed up waiting with bated breath to see what the morning would bring—peace or conflict, equity or injustice. These dark nights where we, too, complain, cajole, and confess to God, hoping for God's miraculous intervention. Few of these nights resulted in miracles. The Israelites still wandered, still thirsted, still desired more than manna, still the snakes bit, still they prayed.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her painful night, wrote, "Finally, close to dawn, I found myself turning away from the God in charge of pain removal toward the God who had stayed with me through the pain no matter what I said." Beloved, isn't it interesting that God doesn't rid Israelite camp of the snakes? Whether they came from God or not is of little consequence to me. Maybe God is the author of pain, maybe not. Maybe both good and bad comes from God's hand, maybe not. But isn't interesting that instead of taking away the snakes, God gave the Israelites a path to life instead, a path through the pain and suffering?

Ann Lamott once wrote, "I do not understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us." I do not understand why it is that we find ourselves caught up in the messiness of life. I do not understand why the floor sometimes collapses under us. I do not understand why we love and lose, why we are pressed to endure both pain in our bodies and suffering in our minds. I do not understand why we can inflict such harm on one another while urging each other to rise for yet another blow. I do know that it is through this pain that God gives the path to life. Look to God, beloved, and live.

Amen.