

Sermon “Snakes Can Be Good?”
Kirk of St James
Sunday March 10, 2024
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Chad hates snakes. Pictures, movies, displays at zoos, he cannot handle seeing them in any form. Chad also talks in his sleep, and one of the funniest instances where these two things combined happened a couple years ago. One night he jumped out of bed, yelled “There are garter snakes everywhere!” Then laid back down and kept sleeping. To this day I tease him about it. It was the most absurd thing to witness however, it also speaks to how deep seated his fear of snakes goes. Even though he is preaching today in Canoe Cove, I guarantee this is not the passage he is preaching on! Snakes aside there are other reasons we might prefer to leave this reading out of the lectionary.

I do not particularly care for this passage in Numbers, but it is one that we need to wrestle with. It is an unusual passage and a number of things that happen in this section of scripture goes against what seems logical or, what we have been taught. If it was not referred to in the gospel of John, it is very likely that we would never deal with this puzzling and confusing passage of Torah.

This section is known as the last of the five “murmuring” stories. From their Exodus from Egypt until now they have found a lot to complain about. The water in Marah was bitter, so God showed Moses how to sweeten it. They complained they did not have food (by the way a very legitimate complaint) so God sent them manna. They again complained that they did not have water, so God told Moses to strike the rock, and it brought forth water. Then they complained that now they had food but no meat to eat, so God sent them quail. Finally in today’s passage we see the people complain about God and Moses, which is the final straw.

A couple things to note when we get to this odd passage in Numbers. The first is that at the heart of this issue is a failure to trust God. To help put this in perspective is helpful to remember that “faith” in the Bible is often understood to mean “trust” rather than “belief.” It is not that people are failing to keep or believe in a particular doctrine, it is that people do not trust God to lead them. Despite their complaints God continues to answer them, the Israelites need to trust that when they need water God will provide it, and when they need food, they will have it. God has not brought them out into the desert to die, God has brought them out to fulfill a promise for more abundant life. Throughout all their doubt and complaining God remains faithful and continues to answer. There is a switch when they begin to complain about God.

If you have ever dealt with toddlers in any way, shape or, form this scenario is likely familiar. “I want a snack.” “No, you can’t have a snack it is almost supper.” “But I am starving.” “Okay, have a banana.” “No, I don’t want a banana, I want chips.” “No, you can’t have chips.” “Well, I want a cookie.” “No, you can’t have a cookie.” “You don’t love me; you won’t let me have what I want.” Each time you answer you are a little shorter tempered. And suddenly the idea that you do not love them because you won’t let them eat junk food before a meal, ends up with a timeout, and everyone grumpy. In Numbers God has had enough. He has answered every complaint, he has taken care of every fear, and time and again the people refuse to trust Him and there are consequences.

I believe another important thing to remember is that what is murmuring here, or we would call complaining, has different roots. When the Israelites begin this new and difficult journey with God their complaints likely first spring from legitimate fears. If you do not have water or, food you will die, which is a logical basic fear. However, sometimes when we complain the thing we are complaining about might actually be something more deeply rooted. For example, while working at camp a major issue became people having snacks at night and

not cleaning up after themselves. What we heard at morning staff meeting was “people ate food and left a mess in the kitchen last night.” That is annoying and frustrating, but it is about more than the dishes. In fact, underneath the complaint might be something more along the lines of “I know people might be hungry before bed, but when you leave a mess that is disrespectful to the kitchen staff and adds to their workload.” In this case a complaint is actually about an underlying issue. I believe that is how the Israelites murmuring first started. Their complaint “we don’t have enough water” speaks to an underlying issue of trust. So, a truer complaint might be “we don’t know if we can trust you God, we don’t know if you are aware of what we need, or if you will provide it.” That is fair.

However, sometimes it reaches a point where complaining for the sake of complaining becomes habit and routine. It is easy to get into a negative cycle and forget to see anything outside of that. The Israelites seem to have gotten themselves into a pattern of complaining and expecting to get what they want. In fact, the dissension has grown so deep that they essentially form a “Let’s go back to Egypt” committee. “Well, we might have been slaves, and life was brutal but at least we had meat to eat.” Then or God it is the ultimate “if you don’t stop complaining I am going to turn this car around” moment. This is also where the passage becomes difficult, poisonous serpents are sent among the people and they die when they are bitten. Then, in order to combat this, Moses is told to craft a golden serpent, and when people look upon it, they are healed. It does not make a great deal of sense if we look at the whole golden calf debacle.

While outwardly it may look similar there is in fact a huge difference. The calf was made in defiance of God, and the serpent made in obedience to him. It is the difference between an idol, and an icon. An idol is something that we worship in great devotion, simply for being what it is. An icon is meant to be an image, which acts like a window onto something even greater.

The serpent pointed to the peoples trust in God that they would be healed if they looked to it when bitten. It really wasn't about the snake; it was about trust. It is interesting to note that about five hundred years later that snake had become an idol and King Hezekiah ordered it to be destroyed.

This passage always feels incredibly messy with blurred lines and ways of understanding, but John helps clear some of this up. Faith and trust can sometimes be counterintuitive. Who would have thought that Jesus dying on the cross would become the answer to eternal life? In looking at what they feared most the Israelites were healed. As one person said "The path to redemption is coated in suffering. The cure for a snake is a snake. The cure for human life is one man's life. The cure for death is death." Through it all we hold on, believing that even when the process is messy and imperfect, and difficult, that ultimately, we can trust God throughout it all.

It makes sense that this reading comes up in the middle of lent. A time when we need to remember that the answer to Good Friday is Easter morning. That sometimes the only way forward is through, even when it is difficult. That sometimes repentance can be painful but ultimately life giving. Lent is a time when we can examine what we are afraid of. When we can ask ourselves if there are things that prevent us from trusting in God. It is also a time when we can re-evaluate our lives to make sure we have not traded icons for idols. I know I keep saying this, but Lent can be a difficult season in our lives but, it is also a journey that is well worth taking.