

“Snakes. Why'd it have to be snakes?” *Numbers 21:4-9*

Norwalk Christian Church, March 15, 2015, Lent 4, Year B

“Snakes. Why'd it have to be snakes?” For fans of the Indiana Jones movies, that line from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* should be familiar to you. It's one of the most popular movie lines in history, uttered as Indy is in hot pursuit of the Israelite's Ark of the Covenant. In order to find the Ark, Indy must first go through the “Well of Souls”, a room he discovers is infested with snakes.

The problem is, Indiana Jones has “ophidiophobia,” an abnormal fear of snakes. Yet in spite of this abnormal fear, he's always running into snakes. As a young man, Indy once fell into a circus train car filled with snakes. If you weren't already afraid of snakes, that should be enough to push you over the edge!

Perhaps if he had stayed as a humble professor he would not have to face his fears. But his adventures always force him to face his fear of snakes. The thing he fears the most is always on the path to the what he desires.

Well, this morning, the thing *I* fear the most is this strange text! What a doozy! We've been preaching from the Revised Common Lectionary, which provides the scriptures we look at each week, and for some reason, I decided it'd be a good idea to preach the Old Testament stories during Lent. I should have read them all, first.

This text is terrifying. It is certainly an appropriate text for the Sunday after Friday the 13th. And after reading it, I'm not sure what I'm more scared of: the snakes or God.

Biblical scholars have tried to take some of the terror out of this text by calling it a “murmuring story,” a text about the Israelites murmuring/complaining about how hard their free life in the wilderness is. Our story is the last of 6 of these murmuring stories.

The complaining starts back in Exodus 11, moments after they are saved from slavery in Egypt. “Moses! If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread.” Moses takes their complaints to God, and God sends them manna from heaven. Manna literally means “What is it?” And whatever this bread-like substance is, every day, it falls from heaven, providing them all the food they need in the middle of the wilderness.

By Numbers 11, they're tired of manna and start murmuring again: “Moses! If only we had meat to eat! There is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” So, Moses goes to God, and God sends a strong wind, and the ground is covered with flocks of Quail.

Once they complain because they're thirsty, so Moses hits a rock with a stick, and God makes a fresh spring flow out of the rock. Always, these people complain to Moses. And always, Moses takes their complaints to God, and God provides.

But today, this time, it's different. This time they speak against Moses *and* God. "God, 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."

Did you catch that? There is no food, God! And, by the way, this food you gave us--all this Manna and Quail--is disgusting! 5 times they complain to Moses. But this time, they complain to God, and that is the last straw, and God let's them have it.

Now, let's be honest. What parent among us has not at least wanted to throw curses at their children when they stand in front of a full refrigerator and complain, "There's nothing to eat in this house!"

Of course, we only think about it. But God is supposed to be better than that. God, aren't you overreacting a bit? I know these people are annoying, but does the punishment fit the crime? Poisonous snakes? Talk about terrifying!

I can't remember the first snake I saw, but as far back as I can remember, I've been afraid of snakes. Psychologists have identified the fear of snakes, *ophidiophobia*, as the most common fear in humans. I remember my grandmother would cry out when she even saw a snake on the TV. Even among people who have never seen a snake, it is still the thing they fear the most.

A recent study¹ suggests that our brains are hardwired into fearing snakes. It's a genetic trait, not a learned behavior. We are born with a "fear snakes" section in our brain. This same study tested primates, too, and they have this same genetic fear, which has led biologists to believe that the fear of snakes predates even the first humans.

Biologists imagine as our pre-human ancestors adapted to life in the trees, an encounter with a snake in the trees at night would have meant certain death. So, our species developed a fear of snakes.

Not far down the list of common fears in humans is the fear of God. Put snakes into the hands of God, and it's no wonder this text seems so terrifying. Don't make God mad--that seems to be the message of this story.

Even now, when a natural disaster hits, people start asking, who did what to deserve God's wrath? When the levees broke in New Orleans after Katrina and flooded the city, self-appointed spokespeople for God all had their opinion on why God sent the storm.

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/31/science/afraid-of-snakes-your-pulvinar-may-be-to-blame.html?_r=0

Televangelist Pat Robertson said it was God's punishment for the sin of abortion. Al Qaeda released a statement about Katrina, saying "God attacked America" because of America's foreign policy. Jack Shick, the guy who makes those awful comic book tracts about the end of time, published one called, "Somebody Angry?" Shick's answer: Yes! God is angry because of the US's policy towards the nation of Israel.

The reasons differed, but the cause was agreed upon. God made this disaster happen.

Read through the Old Testament, and such logic seems to stand up. Scripture records stories of our human ancestors wrestling with this question of God's nature.

The Proverb writer teaches that if you do good, good will come to you. But if you do evil, evil will come. The very first Psalm testifies, "the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."

So, floods and plagues, rain made of burning sulfur, death, disease, pestilence, famine, natural disasters--all are interpreted as punishments from God's hand.

Yet, also in our scriptures is a story like Job. Job is a righteous man, yet great evil comes his way, and he loses his children and all his possessions. "What sin have you done to cause this?" Job's friends and family ask him, but Job is blameless. Sometimes bad things happen to good people.

In the story, Job argues with God, and God listens. I did not deserve this, Job says to God. God doesn't disagree, but God doesn't agree, either, nor does God condemn Job for his accusations and questions. But God doesn't provide easy answers. It's as if the writer of Job wants us to refuse the easy worldview of Proverbs, and live with the ambiguity.

So, what's the answer?

Yes, scripture is filled with difficult texts like ours today. But for every story about God punishing someone, there's a story of God's great love. Even in our terrifying story today, there's more to the story than God's anger.

God has enough of the people's murmuring and sends in the snakes. But notice what happens next. The very second the people ask, God provides another way. Moses makes a bronze serpent, puts it on a pole, and everyone who was bitten lives. In a moment, angry God relents, and takes it all away.

This happens all the time at our house, by the way. "If you don't clean your room, you'll be grounded for the rest of your life!" Then they cuddle up to us, their room still dirty, and we forget all about it.

Wrathful God? Maybe. But also a God who in a moment relents that wrath. I'll be honest, though. I'd rather this text not even be in scripture, and we'd probably just all ignore this story all together if it didn't also make a New Testament appearance.

A few weeks ago, Marti shared with us the story of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus in John 3. Nicodemus came to Jesus in the night because he was afraid, of God and of what others may think. And in response to his fear, Jesus says those immortal words: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son." You've heard that verse before.

But do you remember what Jesus says before those words? Two verses above, Jesus tells Nicodemus, "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." And then..."For God so loved the world, that God gave God's only son..."

I've heard that one of the best ways to overcome your fear is to face it. And as the prophet Kelly Clarkson has said, "What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger."

According to a 2013 New York Times story, that's exactly what happened with our pre-human ancestors. "In her 2007 book 'The Fruit, the Tree, and the Serpent: Why We See So Well,' Lynne Isbell, an anthropologist, argues that most of what makes humans unique among other mammals are traits developed as defense mechanisms against snakes. We can see better than other animals, so that we can see snakes in the dark. Without the presence of snakes, the humans species might have become extinct.

The thing we fear the most, becoming the thing that gives us life. Indiana Jones feared snakes, yet to get what he desired, he had to face them. The Israelites feared the snakes, yet it was only by looking at the image of a bronze snake on a pole that they were healed.

Do you fear God? Let's look at God. What do we see?

Jesus taught us, if you see me, you see God. So, what do we see?
 Jesus, welcoming all. Loving all. Jesus, refusing to retaliate against his unjust accusers.
 Jesus, choosing death over taking life. Jesus, enduring the worst that humanity could offer. Jesus, lifted high on a cross. You see Jesus; you see God.

In our past, yes, we humans have feared God. We interpreted bad things as God's punishment. We told stories of an angry God, punishing people with poisonous snakes. But when God spoke definitively about who God is...when God came into the world to show us the true character of God, God came as Jesus. Everything that Jesus is, God is.

Jesus, lifted up, telling the whole world that God is not angry, but God so loves the world. Look at Christ and you will live. Look at Jesus, and all your fears of God will be overcome by the extravagant, amazing love of Christ. Amen.