

Nathan Brown
"The Journey of Transformation: Fear"
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West Side Christian Church

Numbers 21:4-9

You are not saying it, but I know some of you are thinking it. Isn't it Easter yet? Week One of Lent we were confronted with the wild beasts in our lives and the everyday temptation to sin. Week Two we were faced with picking up our own crosses and making difficult decisions everyday that reflect following Jesus. Week Three, we encounter Jesus' zeal and the anger that stems from his passion for God's justice in our world. And now, in this Fourth Week of Lent, we encounter starvation, thirst, and even death from poisonous serpents in the wilderness.

You are not saying it, but I know some of you are thinking it. You are thinking the same thing the Israelites say to Moses in our passage this morning: "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." We detest the idea of wild beasts, carrying our own crosses, Jesus' anger, and poisonous serpents---Isn't it Easter yet?

Yes, it is about this time on the Lenten journey that the "Back-To-Egypt Committee" begins to form in every congregation. It is at this point in the journey we remember that Good Friday is too close for comfort, that Jesus' death is just around the corner. This Sunday we are reminded that death must be a part of our own journey of faith. Isn't it Easter yet?

You all know, I am grumbling right along with you...especially after today's scripture readings. One of your favorite stories to tell on me is about my fear of snakes. We were gutting a house in New Orleans on our mission trip a couple of years ago. Brendon McNelis and I were removing debris from the back yard. All week, the directors of the site had been telling us to watch out for snakes and spiders. Therefore, I was on heightened alert.

I watched as Brendon picked up a BBQ grill only to reveal a snake coiled up underneath. Well, you can imagine the rest of the story. I immediately jumped back screaming. Then I watched as Brendon lifted up his shovel with the intention of sending this snake to the "choir invisible." The rest of the crew watched as I came out from behind the house screaming, in a bit of a high-pitched yelp. Yes, *my* biggest fear is snakes.

In fact, a recent Harris poll showed that 36 percent of all adults in the United States list snakes as their number one fear. Ophidiophobia is the clinical word for this fear, which affects 49 percent of women and 22 percent of men. But, I would also say

that even if you are one of the few who is not fearful of snakes, I am sure that, if nothing else, when you are conscious of a snake being around, you pay attention to it.¹

I think God was pretty clever in sending serpents as God's messengers in this obscure passage from Numbers because we all tend to pay attention when a snake is around. By the way, that *is* what they are—God's messengers. The Hebrew word for the poisonous serpent is seraph. Seraphim, of course, is most commonly associated with angels—God's messengers.²

The people are complaining against God. Therefore, God sends God's messengers, in the form of fiery serpents, to remind the people who is in charge. These serpents bite the people and our text reads that many Israelites die. As a result, the serpent first becomes a symbol of death in this passage.

The most interesting thing about that Harris Poll, regarding our fears, is the other things of which we are afraid. Just behind snakes are heights, flying in an airplane, being alone in a forest, and spiders and other insects. If you think about it, the top five things of which we are afraid ultimately stem from a fear of death. All of those things listed are things that can certainly cause pain and suffering, and a real possibility of dying altogether.

I remember one of the first books I read in my religious studies at TCU was a text entitled, *The Sacred Canopy*. In this book, Peter Berger makes the argument that ultimately, religion is constructed as a way for human beings to deal with the reality that we will all die. Death is our ultimate fear, therefore, we create religions in order that we might find meaning in death and even hope for life beyond the bounds of death. Regardless of what you think about Berger's claims, he is right about one thing: Death is at the heart of all our fears.

It certainly is for the Israelites. In their grumbling to Moses they even say, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to *die* in the wilderness?" In our own journey toward transformation during Lent, our grumbings might sound similarly: Why do we have to die to our ways of gluttony and greed? Why do we have to die to our ways of prioritizing everything else before you, God? Why do we have to die to the old ways of being church and maintaining the institution? Why do we have to let die the grudges, the animosity, the mourning, the grieving, the resentment, the fear—all those things that separate us from one another and from you? Why do we have to die, Lord? We don't want to die.

Ironically, this week I was at a dinner with Marion and a number of Methodist folks for a continuing education seminar of which they were all a part. The seminar was at Virginia Wesleyan College, so the president of the college was hosting the dinner. He

¹ Brown-Taylor, Barbara. "Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting On The Word*. Fourth Sunday in Lent. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. Pg. 101.

² Towner, W. Sibley. "Exegetical Perspective." *Ibid*, 103.

and I got to talking about where he grew up in South Georgia. It just so happened that he grew up in the same vicinity as my uncle, near a small town named Whigham. Simultaneously, when we connected on Whigham, we said out loud, “Rattle Snake Round-up.”

Yes, Whigham, Georgia is the host site for one of the most (in my opinion) crazy competitions in the world: Rattle Snake Round-Up. Each year the chamber of commerce sponsors this tournament that awards prizes to the individuals who catch the longest rattlesnake, the heaviest rattlesnake, and the most rattlesnakes.

In addition to the competition, there are rattlesnake shows, fried rattlesnake on a stick, games and rides for the kids and other events associated with a town carnival or festival. Did I mention this is crazy?

However, what I did not know, that I discovered in my conversation with this man from South Georgia, is that one of the primary purposes of rattlesnake round-up is to milk the snakes for their venom. Of course, the venom of a rattlesnake is used to make anti-venom for snakebites. Rattlesnake round-up is one of the largest producers of venom for the anti-venom produced in the United States.

Isn't that interesting—the thing that causes death, the thing that we fear the most, is the very thing that saves lives.

That's the message in our Numbers passage. Moses prays to God that the Israelites will be saved from these poisonous messengers. So, God tells Moses to take a serpent, put it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at the serpent and live. All the Israelites who had died were given new life. Every time a snake bit an Israelite, all he or she had to do was look to the serpent and be healed.

Actually, anyone who has had surgery knows something about the terror and healing of snakes on a pole. The American Medical Association adopted the image of the ancient Greek god of healing, a snake twined on a staff. Sometimes, when you go to the hospital, they have to hurt you before they can heal you. Danger frequently paves the way to new life. Often an image of ugliness and death can be the means to wholeness. Sometimes we have to be bitten and even die in order that we can live.³

In this way, I think the Numbers passage echoes the larger story of salvation for Christians. Jesus' violent death on the cross is the moment of God's redemption and reconciliation between God and creation. John tells us in our New Testament reading this morning, “just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”

Seen through the lens of the church, the image of death lifted high on a pole is not that of a serpent, but that of God in Christ lifted high on a cross. When Jesus says, “God

³ Kocher, Craig. “Pastoral Perspective.” Ibid, 100.

so loved the World,” Jesus is asking us to see the God who created the world out of love, as the same God who is lifted high on the cross in redeeming love.⁴

I’ll be the first one to admit that this is sometimes hard to see. Sometimes, it is just easier to move on to Easter. Sometimes it is just easier to go back to Egypt. Sometimes it is just easier not to deal with the reality of death. Sometimes it’s just easier to forget that death is even part of the Christian Story—part of our story. Sometimes it’s just easier for our fear of death to convince us that Good Friday does not have to take place. But we must not allow our fears to dictate our journey.

The equation for this fourth Sunday in Lent is not complicated, though it is hard to get our minds around. 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.⁵

I remember, during my sophomore year in college, I took a class on sexuality and the Bible. The topic seemed intriguing, so I signed up—here I was, a sheltered small-town boy in the midst of high academia, ready to get all the answers to my theological questions.

The first day of class, the professor asked each of us to introduce ourselves and indicate why we had chosen to take this particular course. During this time in college, believe it or not, I was actually president of my fraternity and naïve in more ways than I can count. Ironically, another fraternity president, who was a friend of mine, was also studying religion and taking the class with me.

As we went around the circle, it came time for my friend to introduce himself. He said to the class, “Hello, my name is Austin. As a gay man, I am interested in learning more about what exactly the Bible has to say about sexuality.” Being foolish and thinking that he was joking, I snickered. The silence from the rest of the class indicated to me otherwise.

I am sure my embarrassment immediately showed in my face, for the fiery guilt that burned in my spirit felt as if I had been bitten. After class I went to my friend and apologized profusely, confessing my ignorance and stupidity. He graciously looked at me and said, “Nathan, its okay. I forgive you.” In that moment a piece of prejudice within me died. And because of that death, today I am able to more faithfully live.

Sometimes we have to be bitten. Sometimes we even have to die, in order that we might live.

Isn’t it Easter yet? No....not yet. Amen.

⁴ Kocher, 102.

⁵ Kocher, 102.