

Numbers 21:4-9
John 3:14-21

UNDER THE COVER OF DARKNESS

The Rev. Carol Noren told the following story. One of the strangest and most haunting incidents in my childhood involved the bite of a snake. The Field Museum in Chicago, where my father worked, had a small collection of live animals, as well as the stuffed and mounted ones on display. It happened that one of the herpetologists on staff was working late in his office one night, taking notes on some snakes the museum had just acquired. One was of particular interest, because no one had ever catalogued the species. Somehow, in the course of studying this snake, the herpetologist was bitten. He realized immediately that it was poisonous, and also knew that because the species was unknown, it was likely no known antivenom would be effective. The rest of the museum was deserted, except for a few guards on the main floor, far away from the office where this happened. The scientist quickly decided there was no point in calling for help. He returned to his desk and began writing, describing each symptom as he experienced it. The following morning, when other employees arrived, the herpetologist was slumped over his desk, dead. His notes told the story of what happened, and left a legacy for those who continued his work. The autopsy would provide information on how the poison worked, and suggest an appropriate antivenom. Others might be saved, because he felt the full sting of the serpent. (Pulpit Resource, Vol. 28, No. 2, p. 6)

I used this opening illustration because, one way or another, I knew your ears would perk up and I would have your attention when I talked about snakes. Love them or hate them, we all seem to have a fascination with these creatures that slither. Also, both the Old and New Testament lessons for today have references to serpents, and that's our jumping off point for today's sermon. In the Book of Numbers, chapter 21, we find the Israelites in the wilderness, doing what they did best – they were griping against Yahweh and giving Moses a hard time. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food" (which is a reference to the heaven-sent, daily manna). They wished they were somewhere else, anywhere but there.

By this time in the journey, God has grown quite tired of all their whining, bellyaching, griping and grumbling, and lack of gratitude for all God has done for them in terms of freeing them from slavery, bringing them out of Egypt, and leading them toward the Promised Land. Now here's where the story takes a difficult turn.

God sent poisonous serpents as a judgment against the people. The snakes bit and killed many of the Israelites. Rick Brand describes God's judgment and punishment in these terms: "You Israelites think you're so smart, fine. Go ahead without my protection and guidance. Just remember: there are a lot of serpents out there. Take care of yourselves when they bite you." The people came crawling back to Moses, apologizing and begging for forgiveness.

So God told Moses to put a bronze image of a serpent up in the middle of the camp, so that everyone could see it. Then Moses told all the people, whom the "fiery" or poisonous snakes had bitten, if they would look at the bronze serpent, they would not die. The children of Israel understood that by turning their heads and looking at the bronze serpent, they were acknowledging "from whence cometh our help. Our help cometh from the Lord." Turning the head toward the bronze serpent was a turning of one's heart towards the mercy and power of God. They realized their dependence upon the mercy of God. They were unable to help themselves. They had no power, no knowledge, and no resources to save themselves. By looking at the bronze serpent on a pole, the people relied solely upon the presence and power of God to help them, heal them, and restore them to wholeness. (Lectionary Homiletics, March 2006, p. 71)

I confess that this is a hard story to understand, and it's even more difficult to explain. However,

there are several lessons we can take away from this narrative in Numbers. The serpent on the pole was a visible reminder to the Israelites of their sin in forgetting God. Then, when they saw that serpent on that pole, they lived; and that certainly is a truth to be gained from this lesson – God’s great longing is that we have life and that we especially share our lives with God. After all, the pole was a constant reminder that God was at their side. Finally, it’s interesting to note that, when the people repented, God used the very symbol of their punishment (the serpent), to be the symbol of their healing. Only God could have the power to re-cast the serpent’s image from death to salvation.

Now then, with this story in mind, it’s time to move on to the Good News found within John’s gospel. Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, came to Jesus by night. He came in cognito, under the cover of darkness so he would not be seen. He sought Jesus out for a conversation about life - what’s real, what gives meaning to life, and what does one have to do in order to get it? Jesus quickly set him straight! “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above (or born again).” Nicodemus was confused and wondered how a grown man could crawl back inside his mother’s womb for a “do-over.” But Jesus let him know, in no uncertain terms, he could do nothing. Just as Nicodemus had done nothing whatsoever concerning his own physical birth, the same was equally true about his spiritual birth, i.e., being born from above. It was something God could and would do for Nicodemus; it had absolutely nothing at all to do with what Nicodemus could contribute to the process. In other words, it’s all about the grace of God in Jesus Christ and nothing else!

Then, in referring to the story of how Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, Jesus went on to say, “So must the Son of Man be lifted up (on the cross), that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that God gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

As we saw earlier, God used the very symbol of the people’s punishment (the serpent) to be the symbol of their healing. So also, God radically converted a symbol (this time of Jesus on a cross), and this symbol of his death (which was the result of humanity’s sin) would now and forever become a symbol of the forgiveness of our sins and everlasting life. Unlike the serpents of the wilderness, however, God did not send Jesus as a form of punishment, but rather to “save the world.” (Kaji Rosa Spellman, *Biblical Preaching Journal*, winter 2009, p. 32)

Here’s where the biblical story gets up close and personal. We all live “under the cover of darkness,” which is to say that, like the Israelites in the wilderness or (please pardon the pun) like “Nick at night,” we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We prefer the darkness rather than the light for we can hide our evil thoughts, words, and deeds better under the cover of darkness. In a symbolic sense, “fiery serpents” have bitten us - we have venom in our veins, in the very core of our beings, and that venom is sin. Our sins have a toxic effect on our lives. Our sins have poisoned our relations with God and with each other. We have unkind thoughts. We speak careless words. We hurt and harm others with our actions or we do not act rightly when we should. Our venomous sins serve to spread poison within us and beyond us.

Thank God for there is an antidote! Just as Israel had to look up to the bronze serpent on the pole, so also, we look up to Jesus Christ on the cross. In doing so, we readily admit that we cannot save ourselves. We honestly acknowledge that our help comes only from God, who so loved the world, he gave his only Son. We are powerless, but, in Jesus (and in him alone), there is power to conquer sin and vanquish death. The turning of our heads to look at the Son of Man on the cross is the turning of our hearts to the God who continues to act to give us new life when the old one has been poisoned to death. We turn our heads and our hearts to God through sincere repentance. All we can do is throw off the covers of darkness, confess our sins, and acknowledge that there is no hope for healing and life except in the saving loving power of the One who brought again from the dead the one who died on the cross for our sakes and for the sins of the world. If we do that much, it’s enough. God will take care of the rest. God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. That’s why it’s all about the grace of God.

Then, in grateful response, we step out of the darkness and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we live in the light of Christ Jesus. As John's passage moves from night to day, it invites Nicodemus and all of us to take the same journey away from the night of sin and darkness and into a new day of grace in Christ's light.

Restored and forgiven by grace, we then seek to point others to the light. We strive to no longer hide under the cover of darkness but to live and love in the light of Christ Jesus. In that way, it may be clearly seen that our deeds have been done in God, to quote Jesus.

I want to close by telling an appropriate story. You have heard it before, and you will probably hear it again. But, it is so full of the truth of God that it bears retelling again and again. An old rabbi once asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had begun. "Could it be," asked one of the students, "when you see an animal in the distance and can tell whether it's a sheep or a dog?" "No," answered the rabbi. Another asked, "Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it's a fig tree or a peach tree?" "No," answered the rabbi. "Then when is it?" the pupils demanded. "It is when you can look on the face of any man or woman and see that it is your brother or sister. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night." (Tales of the Hasidim)

Let us no longer live and lurk under the cover of darkness. Rather, turning our heads and our hearts to God, looking to the cross and trusting only in the sacrificial and redemptive death of Christ on the cross, let us live as those who are no longer slaves to sin. Let us step out into the light and love others as we are loved. Let us bask in the light of Christ Jesus' love for us all, and let us live to give glory to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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