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

SNAKE BITES

Where I grew up in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona, there are a lot of venomous creatures. There are 13 species of rattlesnakes in Arizona as well as the shy but deadly coral snake. There is the large lizard called the Gila Monster that locks its jaws when it bites down, giving its venom plenty of time to enter its victim. There are many varieties of scorpions as well as the hairy tarantula spider. Despite all these venomous creatures, my siblings and I played freely and unafraid in the desert surrounding our house. Looking back now as an adult, I marvel that in all our games and explorations in the desert, not one of us every got bit or stung by something venomous.

The Hebrew people were not so lucky. We have today this odd story about the Hebrew people who are wandering in the wilderness after having escaped slavery in Egypt. Their time in the wilderness was not an easy one. God had given them their freedom, but their freedom came with challenges. Freedom did not mean a life without difficulties. Freedom *never* means a life without difficulties. Out there in the wilderness the people experienced times of hunger, times of thirst, and times when they encountered hostile communities. And in today's reading, the problem they face is venomous snakes. And these snakes were biting the Hebrew people and killing them. And so the people understandably complained to Moses about the snakes.

According to the story, however, these venomous snakes were actually sent by God as a punishment for the ways the Hebrew people kept turning away from God. You see, every time the people experienced some kind of hardship in the wilderness—like hunger or thirst—they would complain to Moses. Moses would bring the problem to God and each time God took care

of them. Every single time the people encountered a hardship, God took care of them, providing life-saving water from a rock or the strange food called manna that came from the sky. But that didn't seem to register with the people because the very next time they encountered another problem, it was like they had no memory or no trust in what God had done for them. They didn't seem to remember how God had been good to them before and trust in God's goodness to them again. And so they doubted and complained and took matters into their own hands. And some of the people even declared that they would rather be back in slavery in Egypt than dealing with the hardships they were experiencing. Think about that for a minute. Slavery in Egypt meant whips and brutality, endless labor, constant fear. Think about what these people were telling Moses. They actually preferred bondage to the freedom God offered them.

That may seem crazy to us until we consider all the ways we also opt for bondage in place of the freedom God gives us. Consider the ways we hold on to a resentment rather than seek the freedom that comes with reconciliation or forgiveness. Or how we give ourselves over to the controlling forces of materialism and the desire to feel better about ourselves with the purchase of things. And before long, we are hostage to a way of life, a level of consumption, and the burdens that accompany such choices. Consider the ways we may be in bondage to the habits of excess—in eating, drinking, spending. Sometimes we also choose a life of bondage over the challenging gift of freedom God offers us.

But let's get back to the Hebrew people and their problem with the venomous snakes. We are told that out there in the wilderness with its challenges, the people kept turning away from God and wishing they could be back in bondage in Egypt. And then God sends the snakes and the people start getting bit and dying. And Moses brings this problem to God. And God offers an interesting solution. God tells Moses to fashion a snake out of some bronze and to put

it up on a pole. And whenever someone was bitten by a snake, all they had to do was look up at the bronze snake and they would live. To be clear: the Hebrew people still got bitten. The snakes kept biting. You could still see the imprint of the snake bite right there on the leg; the venom still flowed through their veins. But when they looked up at the snake on the pole, the God of life would save them.

This is such an odd story and it can seem totally un-relatable to us and our lives—unless we realize that snake bites happen to all of us. It's impossible to get through this life without getting bit. Just as sure as snakes are found in the desert, snake bites are going to happen to us in this journey through life. And the venom spreads through our bodies and souls. Your mother said something to you that left a lasting wound upon your mind or spirit. Snake bite! Your extended family rejected you for who you are or who you chose to love. Snake bite! You got laid off from your job. Snake bite! Your spouse dies just before you both were to retire and enjoy your golden years together. Snake bite! You find yourself powerless to control an addiction. Snake bite! Your anger over some injury becomes so consuming, so imbedded in you, that it becomes part of your very identity. Snake bite! Snake bites take many forms and shapes. Sometimes they are the consequences of our turning away from God and God's ways. Sometimes they are random and inexplicable tragedies. But what they have in common is that they rob us of life. The venom of shame, grief, regret, resentment, anger, helplessness flow through our bodies and souls and drain away life.

The Hebrew people in the wilderness may have turned from God and thus brought about the existence of those venomous snakes, but God does not abandon them to the snakes. Moses does as God tells him and he fashions a snake on a pole. And whenever the people got bit by those venomous snakes, all they had to do was look up, and their lives would be saved.

In the reading we heard today from the Gospel of John, Jesus references this story about the snakes in the wilderness. Let's recall for a minute who Jesus is speaking to when he refers to this story about the snakes. Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus—a prominent religious leader who as a religious leader would have known this story very well. Nicodemus has come to see Jesus at night, so no one would see him. We don't know the exact reason for Nicodemus' visit, but it is fair to assume that he was suffering from some kind of a snake bite and he comes to Jesus looking for the antidote.

And Jesus reminds Nicodemus of the story of the snakes in the wilderness. And he tells Nicodemus, "Remember how Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness and it saved people's lives? So too will the Son of God be lifted up. And whoever looks upon him will be saved."

Jesus is of course talking about himself and how he will be lifted up on the cross. A new antidote is offered to God's people to save them from their snake bites. Jesus tells Nicodemus, "For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Looking up at the cross will not bring about some kind of magical healing or protection. But looking up at the cross and what it means for us can indeed offer us the lasting life that Jesus speaks about. When we look up at Jesus on the cross, we come to see that there is a way through this venomous world of hurt, and pain, and brokenness, and ugliness. When we look at Jesus on the cross, we see that there is a way through this venomous world—and a way to the world of abundant life. The way of Jesus is the way of abundant life. The way of Jesus is the way of freedom—hard, challenging, difficult freedom. But in that way lies our freedom from all forms of bondage. And in that way lies our salvation. It is the way of love—even of one's enemies. It is the way of forgiveness, difficult forgiveness. It is the way of generosity and justice, kindness

and compassion. It is the way of sacrifice and service. When we look up at Jesus on the cross, we see the presence of a loving God who reaches out to save us from the snake bites of life. All around us are those forces that can harm us and drain us of life. And within us, are those forces that can harm us and drain us of life. But here comes the antidote. God invites us to look up. Look up and be saved.