

We Can't Fix What We Don't Face

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

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We can't fix what we don't face.

- Rev. Kevin Cosby, St. Stephens Baptist Church

Louisville, Kentucky

The first casualty of war is truth.

- Anonymous

Peace is the first casualty of untruthfulness.

- Rowan Williams,

former Archbishop of Canterbury

There are no short cuts to being the people of God. It takes a lifetime. But our story from Numbers today is about our ancestors becoming impatient. They had to go the long way around the land of Edom, and they wanted a short cut.

They've been heading somewhere without getting anywhere for a long time. What should have taken a few months is taking years upon years. In fact, when it's all said and done they will have wandered in the wilderness for forty years. That's a lot of going around in circles. When they first left Egypt they were singing and dancing. But now, they've lost the spring in their step and the song in their heart. Justice delayed is justice denied. "Maybe Moses should have asked for better directions; we thought he was our leader. It feels like Moses doesn't have our back. And where is God in all of this? God is the one who got us into this. Egypt was bad but at least we had three meals a day, a job – it was slavery but at least we weren't

going around in circles in the middle of the desert. Now we live on manna and walk in the sun all day. So, God, what's the deal?"

Just when it seems that things can't get any worse – are you ready for this?! Bunches and swarms and nests of snakes invade their camp – serpents, poisonous snakes, slithering here, there, and everywhere. It's a nightmare come to life. People are grabbing their children and trying to run for safety but there is no safety, the snakes are everywhere. People are being bitten. They're dying! They cry to Moses; they cry to God, "Help Us! Do something! Get rid of these snakes!" So Moses prays and talks with God to take the snakes away.

Now, I know some of you like snakes. Some of you have spent years studying snakes and you go out of your way to be nice to snakes. But go with the story on this. In the story snakes are a consequence of human sin. Way back in the Garden of Eden, the snake is the embodiment of evil. The wily serpent comes to poison the trust between God and people, between one person and another, between humanity and Creation. And here we see the serpent appear again on the wilderness march to freedom and justice and a new future – a whole slew of fiery serpents on the attack bringing their poison. In the Bible, if you show me a snake I'll show you sin, poison, mistrust, brokenness, suspicion, and evil.

This is a strange story but it's a great story. "Here's what you do Moses," says God, "make a model of a poisonous snake out of bronze and put it on a pole and everyone who gets bitten should look at it and they will live."

And the people say, "What?! This is ridiculous! This is not what we asked! We want God to get rid of the snakes and Moses, you're going to put a bronze

snake on a stick!”

But God said, “Make a snake of bronze. And when you are bitten – after you are bitten, with the venom flowing through your system attacking your vital organs, breaking your body down, then if you will look at the bronze snake you will live. After you are bitten.”

“We want the snakes gone. We don’t want the poison. We’re tired and sick and discouraged and near despair and now we’re infested with poisonous snakes that are killing us.”

And God says, “You’ve got to face the snake.” As my friend the Rev. Kevin Cosby in Louisville, KY says, “We can’t fix what we don’t face.” In other words, we have to face the truth in order to find healing. Denial and deflection lead to death by the slow poisoning of racism, of injustice, of fear, and hatred. If we don’t face the truth, we die. Our conscience dies, our sense of morality dies, our ability to empathize with others dies. Our relationship with God will die.

There is an old saying, “The first casualty of war is truth.” Meaning, when the shooting starts, telling the truth goes out the window. Theologian Rowan Williams turns it around and says, “Peace is the first casualty of untruthfulness,” which is to say, if we live by lies and falsehood, refuse to face the truth, violence will be the result. Living by lies, living in denial, and building walls and getting our guns are all connected. It’s poisonous. Living in denial and falsehood and saying, “Everything is fine. We don’t need to wear masks; we don’t need the vaccine” is a poison that is killing us.

O God, our world and our lives and our society are poisoned. Take the poison away! Take the snakes away!

And God says, “You’re going to have to face the snake.”

Facing the snake means that we have to look at it squarely. Facing the snake is the opposite of denial and the opposite of falsehood. Facing the snake is about dealing with the truth of what makes us uncomfortable, what we’re afraid of, what we don’t like, or a truth we’d like to ignore.

David and Ann Norton told me a story a few years ago, that I repeat this morning with their permission. David had a great uncle who was much beloved in the family. He was a good guy, active in church, active in the Lions Club, the Shriners, and the Masons. People in his hometown of Haynesville, LA knew him and respected him. When he died, his kids told Ann that their father wanted Ann and David to have his trunk full of keepsakes up in the attic. The trunk and everything in it, was to be theirs. Ann went up to the attic and opened it and it was full of stuff she loves – old family photos, keepsakes, the great-uncle’s letter jacket, his army uniform from WWI, and on and on. She sat in the attic going through all these interesting family heirlooms, making her way down to the bottom of the trunk. Finally, she reached the bottom where there was one more item wrapped in plastic. She unwrapped it, wondering what it could be, and then she let out a scream that the whole house could hear. It was his Ku Klux Klan robe, complete with hood and insignia. All the cousins came running up the stairs and when they saw the Klan robe, they too were shocked and horrified.

Ann and David told me that the entire family had to face the truth of their

beloved uncle and father. He was a good man, respected, and loved by many but at the same time, he was a member of the KKK, a racist terrorist organization in America. True, many White men in the U.S., not just the South, were members of the Klan during the 1920's. But at the same time, it was wrong. And it raises the question of what do we do about our great uncles or grandfathers or ancestors and our racism?

I've been in a webinar with Baylor University about Baylor's racist founders. The first four presidents of Baylor were slaveholders. What do we say about that? We don't demonize them, but we also do not idealize them. They were real people; they were not statues. They lived in a particular context. At the same time, we do not dismiss or deflect that they participated in White Supremacy and chattel slavery. The same is true for our beloved Stephen F. Austin. The "father of Texas" was a slave owner and advocate of slavery.

Part of facing the truth, is telling the truth. Real people, in the real world, participating in good things but also participating in evil. The Baptist church of my childhood had me memorize Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." I was taught that meant all. Everyone. And that includes my ancestors and David Norton's great-uncle, Judge Baylor and Stephen F. Austin. And it includes you and me. Everyone has sinned and we all find ourselves caught in sin.

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove tells the story of Rev. William Barber when Barber was a young, activist Black preacher trying to organize and get some things done but when the crunch time came, many of his White allies would back off and give in to the White powerholders. An old deacon told him, "Here is what you

have to understand about White folks. At the end of the day, their choice isn't whether the cause is just. What they've got to decide is whether their mama lied to them." What he was saying is that for those of who are White, our Whiteness is tied up with people we love and trust, who over time, shaped our imagination and how we conceived who we are. No one wants to call his or her mama a liar (see Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Reconstructing the Gospel: Finding Freedom from Slaveholder Religion*, p. 157).

For White folks, this means giving up our controlled, settled, and orderly world. Who we thought our uncle was, is more complicated than we had known. Those heroes we've long had and of whom statues are made, were not statues. They were complicated people. They were sinners like us, and to face this is unsettling, uncomfortable, and disconcerting. But it's the truth.

My old teacher and friend, church historian Bill Leonard says, though "We cannot repent for them, we can repent because of them."

The first step in repentance is facing it. Facing the truth of what we fear or what we detest or hate. Facing our sin – facing what we do and don't do, but also facing that we find ourselves in something bigger than ourselves. If we don't face it, it will destroy us.

Facing it also means that we cannot flee from it. Some things you can't run from and for whatever reason, the people of God could not outrun these fast-moving serpents. Apparently, they went wherever the people tried to run.

In 1939 Dietrich Bonhoeffer made his second trip to the U.S. and Union

Theological Seminary in NY. He was given the opportunity to stay at Union and escape the already dangerous Nazi persecution going on inside Germany, some of which Bonhoeffer had already experienced. But Bonhoeffer could not find peace in the U.S. and he was increasingly critical of America and the American White church. In an essay called “Protestantism Without Reformation” Bonhoeffer said that the American Christian had never learned to trust God fully or to know what it means to stand under the judgment of the Word, for he had never had to learn the lesson. Flight from persecution was the founding condition of the American religion. American Protestants, Bonhoeffer said, preferred to claim “the right to forgo suffering and live out their faith in freedom without a struggle.” Choosing between fight and flight, Americans always chose flight and they did not know how to stay, how to persevere through suffering (see Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory*, p. 480-483).

Of course, we now know that part of what Bonhoeffer was wrestling with was whether or not to stay in America or return to Nazi Germany and suffer alongside his fellow Germans. Bonhoeffer chose to return to Germany and within four years was arrested and within five was executed by the Nazis.

What Bonhoeffer was saying is that sooner or later we have to face the snake. Instead of being in denial for as long as we can and then, when we can no longer be in denial, we try to run from the snake, part of being Christian is learning “to stand under the judgment of the Word,” as Bonhoeffer said.

Instead of shortcuts, sometimes we must stand under the judgment of God. We have to face unpleasant truths and hear perspectives that challenge us.

In Matthew chapter 18 Jesus tells us that the process of being the church has to do with listening and speaking the truth, even and perhaps most especially when it is uncomfortable. And then, and only then can we move toward forgiveness and reconciliation, healing and wholeness. Without listening to the truth from our sisters and brothers we lose our souls. Listening to our sisters and brothers who are Black is about hearing the truth. It's about being the church. There are no shortcuts.

Because here's the rest of the story: Moses says that when we face the snake we will be healed.

Jesus takes this same story from Numbers and says in John 3, "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Truly Human One (the Son of Man) be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:15-16).

What Jesus is telling us is that when we face the snake instead of fear paralyzing us or poison killing us, we will discover that God is healing us. God in Christ is lifted up on the cross and absorbs the poison and then transforms the poison into healing and redemption and wholeness.

Facing the snake is a life-long calling. No shortcuts. No quick fixes. The New Testament calls this taking up the cross. It is something we do every day for all our lives. We take up the cross and allow Christ to show us our sin. We take up the cross and repent and we take up the cross to be healed from the poisons which are trying to kill us.

Jesus refers to the story of the snake being lifted up in talking to Nicodemus. John 3 tells us that Nicodemus was a leader and educated. For our purposes this morning, he was a White man. He comes to see Jesus at night, probably because he doesn't want to be seen and maybe because he does not want to stand in line with the poor people. He's privileged. At the same time, I suspect he thinks that God is doing something with this rabbi from Nazareth. This is a God-thing, and Nicodemus is drawn to it.

His sense of superiority shines through from the first words, "We know..." Nicodemus does not come pleading, "Lord, have mercy" or "if you are able, please ..." Instead, Nicodemus assumes he understands how the world works and knows what is going on. "We *know* that you are a teacher who has come from God" (John 3:2).

Jesus is patient with Nicodemus. He loves him and listens, but then he explains, "Nicodemus, you're a good guy who is plenty smart and you're well-connected and privileged. But I tell you, you cannot enter into God's Movement, without being born again. You have to start over. You need to give up your privilege, your connections, your Whiteness, your assumptions about who you are and how the world works. Give up what you think you know and be born all over again" (John 3:3).

It is interesting that we do not know what Nicodemus decides. As several commentaries say, this story is not about Nicodemus. It's not about the White guy with the correct answer.

We do know many chapters later that Nicodemus shows up to help bury the body of Jesus. It makes me wonder. Maybe Nicodemus found his true calling among this diverse band of disciples who followed Jesus? Among the Beloved Community of Jesus, Nicodemus wasn't a leader; he wasn't in charge, and he was not privileged. But in following Jesus and learning what it meant to take up the cross every day, he found that he was being healed, and made whole. He found eternal life (see Wilson-Hartgrove, pp. 117-119).

May it be so with us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.