

Good News Among the Bad

[Texts - Numbers 21; John 3:14-21]

Pastor Dave Shackle

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In this morning's Old Testament reading, we hear the people of Israel grumble and complain against their leader, Moses; and against their God. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to die in this wilderness? For there is no food...and we detest this miserable food." Now that's a curious complaint: that there's *no* food, yet "we detest this miserable food!" That "miserable food" is the Heavenly Manna that God has provided - food they originally called "The Bread of Angels." But now, after being sustained by it throughout their journey, the Israelites begin to loathe this "miserable food" and long for "the good old days" back in Egypt. They forget that their days in Egypt consisted of enslavement, backbreaking labor, and even the genocide of a generation of their firstborn males.

They also forget how fervently they had prayed for God to send them a leader who would deliver them from their Egyptian taskmasters. Or that when they needed water, God provided; when they needed food, God gave them manna; when they wanted something more than manna, God sent flocks of quail into their camp. All along the way - for forty years - God leads, protects, and provides for these people; yet time and again they grumble and complain against Moses, their leader, and against their God. So, what's a God to do?

According to the story, “The Holy One sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many of them died.” I think that’s a terrible over-reaction - sending poisonous snakes to attack people because they complain! [Though I’m not complaining....!] But this does raise a relevant question for you and me today: “Does God send pain and suffering to get through to people, or to send them a message?” Personally, I don’t think so; however I do believe that God can use our pain to heighten our awareness of that Divine Presence which can help us through our most difficult and devastating times.

When pain and tragedy touch our lives [and they inevitably will] there is a Divine Presence and Compassion - often found in human form - that can surround and sustain us in that terrible time of suffering. And the truth is, that sometimes it takes a jarring disruption of our comfortable routine to shake us out of our numb complacency; to remind us that our time on earth is fleeting; to help us appreciate our time and our blessings more fully, so that we can be more fully alive and engaged with the people around us.

When the Israelites feel the pain and panic that those snakes bring, they say to Moses, “We have sinned by speaking against God and against you; pray to God to take away these serpents.” So Moses prays for the people of Israel; yet for some reason, God doesn’t drive those serpents from the camp. [Maybe God was saving that gimmick for Saint Patrick] Or *maybe*, if those snakes had simply disappeared, the people would have quickly forgotten that God and Moses really were there to give them guidance, help, and strength. So God comes up with a different gimmick, instructing Moses to make a fiery serpent of bronze and put it up on a pole. Then, whenever a serpent bit someone, that person could look at the image of that serpent and live.

I’ve got to admit, that sounds like a really weird way to cure a snake bite: to look at a replica of that reptile and be healed. But maybe it’s a really clever way of imparting a timeless truth: that you and I must be willing to honestly face our problems, our past, our pains, and our fears, in order to truly overcome them and to become whole.

In this morning's New Testament reading, Jesus says, "As Moses lifted-up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted-up, so that whoever believes in him may have everlasting life." Throughout this Lenten season, our central focus is on Jesus' steadfast journey to the Cross. And throughout the Church Year, the focal point of our worship space is the Cross of Jesus Christ. This Cross invites us to raise our eyes and our hearts, and to contemplate Christ's Complete Story: that marvelous story about how Divine Love and Life, Forgiveness and Grace, overcomes the most terrible forces of fear and hatred, betrayal, suffering and death. In the person of Jesus Christ, we recognize that even when the most devastating power of evil has done its worst, that the Divine Power of Life and Love *will* rise-up and prevail. In Jesus, God doesn't take-away the problems of pain, suffering, and death; instead, God takes them on and transforms them, raising-up the hope-filled promise of new and everlasting Life.

Other than the Cross, perhaps the most recognizable "sign" of Christianity is John 3:16. That sign pops-up at sporting events as regularly as Waldo does in those "Where's Waldo" books. [Ah, there he is! And look, he's holding that sign!] While most Christians and even many non-Christians know what that Bible verse says, it's become so familiar that we can become desensitized to the profound depth and scope of its message. "For God so loved the *world* that God gave God's only Son, so that *everyone* who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Divine Love isn't limited to just *part* of this world. It's not given only to special "spiritual" individuals or to favored religious groups. On the contrary, it is extended most passionately to those people who most need it! It beckons *all* people to believe in Jesus - not just as a "Christian Savior" but as a Cosmic *Sign*: that we can truly trust in the gracious love of our Divine, Creative Source - even if we haven't been converted to Christianity! This awesome Love doesn't merely manifest itself when we are good, or when Life is good. In fact, the Divine Love that Jesus embodies is at its fullest and finest when Life completely unravels; in the midst of earthshattering desperation, suffering and

tragedy. It is then when this amazing Love rises-up - to give us genuine hope, comfort, and inner-peace; to transform Life's great tragedy into that greater Triumph of the Human - and Divine - Spirit.

In those most devastating times when troubles surround us like a brood of vipers, you and I can lift-up our eyes and our hearts, and envision that Divine Love which is revealed through Jesus Christ. Even though our troubles may not slither away, you and I can find the strength and courage to face them. And most importantly, we can remember that we don't need to face them alone! That Eternal, Holy Presence is with and within us all! It's a Presence so close and so real, that you and I can reach-out and touch it; as surely as we can reach-out and touch our neighbor's hand.