

Why Did It Have to be Snakes?

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

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In today's Old Testament reading, the people of Israel are doing something that they, and possibly some of us, are pretty good at doing. They're grumbling and complaining. They *have* been wandering in the wilderness for nearly forty years and are no doubt tired of it. They are anxious to enter the Promised Land. Apparently, many of them have forgotten that the reason they *have* wandered for so long is because, about forty years earlier, they *refused* to enter the Promised Land. They were afraid of the people who lived there, seeing them as invincible "giants"; and they didn't believe that the Holy One could lead them in safely. So they wander in the wilderness for forty years, until most of that generation had passed away.

This morning's story picks up with a younger generation of Israelites who are ready and eager to enter that Promised Land, but who now face another obstacle. The King of Edom won't allow the Israelites to pass through his country, which stands directly between them and their destination. The Israelites promise to travel straight through Edom, without stopping for food or water; they even offer to pay a fee for any damage their livestock might cause, but they are refused. The King of Edom amasses his army at the border and says, "Don't even try it!" So the Israelites, after forty years in a holding pattern, must now go many more long and difficult miles, in order to reach their final destination.

As they begin to slowly make their way around the land of Edom, they become extremely frustrated and impatient. They grumble and complain against Moses, their leader; and speak-out against their God. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to die in this wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Now that's weird - that they complain that there's *no* food, but in the next breath say, "we detest this miserable food!" This "miserable food," being the Heavenly Manna which God has provided for them - food they originally called "The Bread of Angels". But now they loathe this "miserable food", and they harken back to the good old days of Egyptian slavery! After all, it couldn't possibly be as bad as their parents or grandparents said it was.

The Israelites forget that it was they, as a people, who had pleaded and prayed for God send them a deliverer to lead them out of Egypt. And that when they needed water, God provided; when they needed food, God sent them manna; when they wanted something more than manna, God sent flocks of quail into their camp. All along the way - for forty years - the Holy One leads, protects and provides for them, yet time and again they grumbled and complained against God and against Moses.

Now before you or I bust the Israelites for their bad form, we probably should consider the times in our *own* lives, when we fail to recognize our many blessings; yet are quick to complain when things go poorly. Every day, you and I receive from our Holy Source of Life, the Gift of Life itself - the ability to move and breathe, think and feel, interact and communicate. We are blessed with homes, families and friends; abundant food and water. You and I are not displaced refugees looking for a homeland - we live in a land with so many blessings that we often take for granted. We rarely even pause to consider just how fortunate we are, or to contemplate the Wondrous Source behind it all.

The Israelites *were* refugees, yet even in their wandering, they experience many amazing blessings. They've been liberated from slavery; they're provided food and water for their journey; and they have a hopeful destination - a Promised Land where they can finally be free. Above all, they have a close and palpable relationship with the Holy One, who watches over them night and day. Yet like many of us, the people of Israel forget about the blessings, and focus on the problems. They need to be reminded that, regardless of the obstacles they face, the Holy One is present to protect and sustain them. So, according to this story, "The Holy One sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many of them died."

Now that seems like a terribly harsh response: to send *snakes* to attack people, simply because they grumble and complain - not that I'm grumbling or complaining! But perhaps we're missing the larger picture. After all, in this narrative, the Israelites have been wandering for *years* through a wilderness that is *infested* with snakes. Yet up to this point, there's not one account of those snakes *ever* bothering them. Apparently, the Israelites forget that the snakes are even there, because they've become so accustomed to the Holy One's daily protective care. And here's the hard truth: Sometimes it takes a jarring disruption of our comfortable routine, to

shake us out of our complacency; to help us appreciate our blessings more fully; to remind us that our lives are fragile and fleeting - so that we can become more fully alive and engaged. This doesn't mean that God *sends* pain and suffering to "send us a message". Nevertheless, God can *use* our pain and suffering to remind us of that Divine Presence which can help us through those difficult and devastating times.

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 the Holy One 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 that gimmick is being saved for Saint Patrick.] Or *maybe*, if those snakes had simply disappeared, the people would have quickly forgotten that the Holy One really was there to give them guidance and help, strength and healing. So God comes-up with a different gimmick, instructing Moses to make a serpent of bronze and put it on a pole. Then, whenever a serpent bites someone, that person can look at the image of that deadly serpent and live.

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

Life, by its very nature consists of ups and downs, good times and bad, joys and sorrows, gain and loss. And no matter how much you or I grumble or complain about it, that's not going to change. What *can* change, is the way we understand and deal with Life's inevitable difficulties, pain, and loss. And this is where the image and person of Jesus Christ can help us.

When Life's troubles and pain surround us like a brood of vipers, you and I can lift-up our eyes and envision the healing grace which is embodied in Jesus.

The One who raises-up the lowly and lost, who comforts the hurting and the hopeless.

The One who willingly gives-up his life, rather than give-up on the Divine message of peace, unity and love.

The One who reminds us that we don't have to face Life's obstacles and problems alone.

The One who shows us that Divine Love and Life will always ultimately win the day.