

Sermon Lent 4 Serpents and S Proteins

Pray: Search me, O God and know my heart, test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there's any offensive way in me and lead in the way everlasting. Amen.

What fascinates you about snakes? What frightens you? There's an unbelievable connection between snakes, or 'serpents' mentioned in today's bible readings and the Covid19 vaccines being rolled out.

In our Lenten series, we are examining the Covenants God makes with humanity, how each covenant touches the world God made and loves, God who sees our deepest need and seeks us out to restore what was lost; no more flooding the entire world despite the humanity's inhumanity to one another, no more childlessness for an older couple, through whom the whole world would be blessed; no more lawlessness is necessary because of God's Covenant with Moses through the 10 Cmdts that are given to the whole world, bringing order out of chaos.

Next week, an exploration of the covenant revealed through the prophet Jeremiah, that God intends to write, not on stone or on a stick holding a bronze serpent, but on people's hearts.

Today, in our bible readings, our focus is on a promise of God, that grows out of the Moses Covenant; how God's transforming power works in surprising ways to bring about healing.

These messages are sent out with the prayer that all might come to know they are loved by God, and to receive the healing, loving presence of God in Christ, to marvel as I do that God's promise is for the pandemic and beyond. What if the sickness of humanity is deeper than a vaccine can fix?

Nearly everything about our first bible reading from the Old Testament book of Numbers feels, far removed from 21st-century life, and yet, during a global pandemic, echoes with a truth we can't ignore. God can take what is meant for ill and make it good.

Let's get the context of the first reading. Numbers, fourth book of the bible, ch 21 and its serpent story, chafes against both our theological sensibilities and our scientific good sense. Surely God does not send poisonous snakes to punish human beings for their missteps? Certainly, just looking at a bronze snake does not assuage a medical ailment like snakebite. Where is the anti-venom? And where is the God with whom we feel safe and comfortable?

In this week's text from Numbers, the peoples' complaint - no water out here in the wilderness and the food is terrible! - sounds like something the character Sheldon Cooper would say on TV's Big Bang Theory quoting his mother's story about a farmer who was also a preacher that "never charged a thing for his preaching, and it was worth it, too."

The utterance of the complaint by God's people is immediately followed by the statement, "Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died" (v. 6). God never explicitly says that God sent the snakes *because* the people complained. Causality is implied because the people themselves name their "speaking against" God and Moses as the ultimate source of their suffering (v. 7).

In this story, God does not give the people what they ask for. They want Moses to get God to "take away the serpents from us" (Numbers 21:7). But the serpents do not go away, nor do they stop biting.

Like health officials saying to us, once you have the vaccine, don't stop practicing social distancing - wear a mask, wash your hands, we're not out of the woods yet. The snake keeps biting.

God instructs Moses on how to heal the people who are bitten; they are still bitten, but they live. Deliverance does not come in the way that they expect. The means of healing is in the shape of what the people desire to be rescued from; a bronze serpent erected on a pole. Bizarre but true.

Maybe not so bizarre. Our fight in the pandemic today is not against venom but virus. With the caveat that I am not a doctor, infectious diseases control specialist or immunologist, the Health Canada's website describes three types of vaccines amazingly developed in just one year. See you if you can see the connection that I see.

Vaccines prompt an immune response so that your body remembers how to fight a virus in the future. Some vaccines use a whole virus to cause your immune system to respond. Other vaccines use parts of the virus or genetic material that provides instructions for making specific proteins like those in the virus.

You've seen images of the Covid19 round red sphere with spikes sticking out. Those spikes on the surface of the COVID-19 virus are called S proteins. The S protein helps the virus get inside your cells and start an infection. Not good. All three types of vaccines spur our body's immune system, with either a genetically modified or engineered S protein or a weak version of Covid19 itself with the S protein intact. Your body recognizes the S protein and develops anti-bodies to combat it. That's good.

That's how vaccines work: use a little of the bad to make something good and your body does the rest.

Now, think of the bronze serpent on a pole; lift up the pole on which is a representation of the thing that was killing them, get people to look at it and God will do the rest.

The power of the S – protein – like the serpent's poison - is broken. Venom and virus defeated by an interior army. Ok, maybe that's stretch in terms of comparison. You may still not like snakes. It is clear however that we are at war with Covid19. But thank God, people's pain and suffering are being relieved, then and now.

The March edition of the Anglican Journal has a quote by a vaccine developer named Marianne Stanford. Marianne says that despite her long hours of research into the Covid19 vaccine, it is her worship life as a member of the Anglican Parish of French Village, Nova Scotia, that has kept her sane, through the pandemic. There's something about the trust and friendship of being part of the community of faith, locally and worldwide, that keeps us sane and serving. Our Zoom Coffee Hour this past Wed had that effect on me. Thank God for Christ Church.

Please continue to follow all public health protocols to keep everyone safe. The snake keeps biting.

As 21st-century Christians it may take us out of our comfort zones to imagine God as a dangerous, unpredictable presence in our lives. Yet, if we claim that we've got God all figured out, then we have ignored the mystery and divine freedom with which God is characterized throughout much of Scripture. A domesticated God does not pull a people out of slavery, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land; no, we need a God who is "on the loose!"

It's interesting that the Canadian Medical Association and the World Health Organization use the symbol of the rod of Asclepius, depicting a single serpent wound around pole, a reflection of Egyptian iconography but transformed by Moses' use of a bronze serpent on a pole to bring healing; that which was meant for evil was being turned by God for good.

As I asked at the beginning, what if the sickness of humanity is deeper than a vaccine can fix?

The story of Lent, Holy Week and Easter is the story not of escaping death but of passing through death into life.

The Gospel reading describing learned Jewish scholar Nicodemus coming to chat at night, Jesus focuses on an image Nicodemus would have known, of Moses lifting up the serpent stick and the people getting healed. Jesus equates himself with the serpent on the stick looking ahead to his being hauled up on the cross. Jesus is lifted on the cross taking the curses of the world onto himself, not just for the Jewish people but for all humanity, all the cosmos; God so loved the world, John 3:16.

The author of the Narnia Series among many other famous works of fiction and non-fiction, CS Lewis had a stepson, Douglas Gresham who tells a story about when he was ten and his mother Joy, was gravely ill in a hospital in Oxford England. His mother and father had been divorced for several years, Douglas' mother had been dating CS Lewis, who was upto that point a confirmed bachelor as a sixty yr old. When young Douglas was told that his mother's death was imminent, his mother being the only person fully in his life, he was devastated. To feel that alone, Douglas said, was almost indescribable. As he was walking back after hearing the terrible news at the hospital to the Kilns, the name of CS Lewis' house in Oxford, he passed along a pathway that led through a cemetery surrounding the local Anglican Church, Holy Trinity, Hedington Quarry. As Douglas approached the wrought iron gate, totally alone and grieving on a grey featureless day,

he lifted the wrought iron latch of the gate and stepped into the cemetery / churchyard, as if he were stepping out of the shadowlands, into real life. He was suddenly aware of a very powerful presence in the churchyard, a compassionate, grieving presence sharing his pain. Young Douglas was not someone who had knowledge about God or religion. He was a bit of rebel even at ten years old. He had never really prayed in his life. Yet he knew who it was; he knew it was Jesus in the churchyard, suffering with him. He heard Jesus' voice, not audible but real. "If you can't live without your mother, I can fix it" the presence said. Douglas went into the church, it was unlocked in those days, and he knelt at the altar rail. There was no one else in the Church except himself and the presence, and he prayed with every fibre of his being that his mother would be allowed to live, because he felt he couldn't live, he couldn't get by, without her. Instantly he was told, it was fixed and he could go home and stop worrying. He walked out of the church and was at peace, walked into the churchyard and was back in the shadowlands, as he closed the gate behind him. He went home in peace and his mother went into remission, more or less that day. And he had a wonderful nearly four years, as did his mother and CS Lewis, the best four years of either CS Lewis or Joy's life. After that time, Douglas was once again brought to the hospital with CS Lewis, to hear the news that his mother's cancer had returned as they knew it might someday. Now he was fourteen, no longer 10, but he did the same thing, walking home from the hospital, along the path leading toward home, lifting the latch on the gate, not expecting the same experience yet here again, walking into this amazing moment, the presence of Jesus saying, "if you miss your mother so bad, it can be done again." By this time as a fourteen yr old, he had a home, he had friends, a step-father he had grown to love as his own dad and he no longer needed his mother as much as when he was ten. He was more independent. In all honesty he knew he could live without his mother. The only thing he could think of to say was, 'thy will be done.' He walked out of the church yard into the shadowy lands of this world. And his mother died about a week after that. A strange experience, that did not suddenly make him a Christian. That came later.

The image of the poisonous serpent, the thing that had been so deadly, became for those Israelites in the wilderness an image that promised healing and life. Thanks to vaccines being administered, the virus can be conquered by our body's immune system. In the Christian imagination, the cross was eventually transformed from an instrument of sin's oppression, torture and execution to a vital symbol that reminds us of God's promise of resurrection, a healing for sin that no human-generated solution could accomplish.

So, whether you receive the Moderna, Pfizer-BioN tech, Astra Zeneca, Janssen/Johnson and Johnson vaccine or one other of the 150 other vaccines currently being developed by Marianne Stanford or Andrew and Holly McCollom's son Matt, I see a glimmer of why this story of the serpent might have been kept alive in the imagination of the Israelites, such that it was included in the Torah. The one thing, the one enemy we all share is death itself. And God takes death and stands it on its head; God announces that out of death comes new, vibrant, resurrection life. The promise maker, the promise keeper who shows us his love is stronger than death. Sometimes what we need is a change of heart. Thanks be to God! Amen.