

The Power of God's Grace
Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21

Anne-Marie Jeffery
March 11, 2018

We have a very strange story in our Old Testament reading. We hear about the Israelites after they escaped from Egypt – after God parted the sea to help them escape. They wandered the wilderness for 40 years before they got to the Promised Land. Naturally on this difficult journey there was complaining and that is what we are hearing about in our scripture this morning in our Old Testament reading from Numbers. The people are tired of tromping around the desert and the food God was providing.

And so the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” As one commentator wrote - The “Let’s go back to Egypt” committee gets wound up. “Let’s go back to Egypt!” they whine. “Slavery in Egypt was bad, but it was better than freedom. With freedom come too many choices,”¹ Of course the people have forgotten how hard it was in Egypt but that is what we do.

God gets fed up with the complaining. It was not the first time that this has happened. The people had complained before about lack of food, lack of water and lack of direction and God provided. So when they complain about the food and the water yet again, God sends poisonous snakes to bite the people and they die. This gets their attention right away and they say they are sorry. They ask for Moses to help them. Moses prays and God tell him to make a bronze snake for the people to look at when they are bitten and they will be healed. Moses makes the bronze snake, holds it up and the people are healed. Have you seen the snake that is part of the symbol of doctor? This is where it comes from.

In so many ways this is a terrible story. God’s response to the people is to send snakes to bite the people so that they die. How does this work with our gospel when we hear Jesus say that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son?

First of all, we have to remember that this was written almost 3,500 years ago – a very very long time ago! The experience of God for the people at that time and the culture was quite different. What we have is how they experienced God. I find it helpful to listen to what God did do – that once the people repented, a way was made. A way was made for the people to be saved. This is what is echoed in our Gospel when Jesus says, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. God loves us and God makes a way.

God makes a way. God loves us. Often we forget that as we face the challenges that life brings. I wonder if in sometimes we need some form of the poisonous snakes to wake us up – not to die – but to have our eyes opened to how much God loves us, because we tend to forget God loves us. When times get tough, we complain. We blame God. And then sometimes we get a wake up call

¹ Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide (Feasting on the Word: Year B volume) (Kindle Locations 3677-3681). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

that turns us back towards God and that reminds us of the God loved us so much that he sent his only Son to us. Hopefully, that wake up call will have nothing to do with snakes!

Often our wake up call comes through others and this is what we discussed at our weekday Eucharist last week when we focused on the telling stories of grace – stories of God’s grace. We were discussing our scripture from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians which says, “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved”

At our service, before our discussion, I shared the story from Dr. Janet Hunt who described working with a patient who was very ill, but whose pain was more spiritual than physical. Dr. Hunt told the patient that God loved her, would never let her go and pronounced absolution for her sins. Dr. Hunt left depressed not knowing if her words had any impact, but the next day, she was surprised to find the patient was not only physically better but even more spiritually better. Dr. Hunt found God’s grace expressed in this encounter. And this is what I asked the folks at the service to reflect on. I asked them to share times in their lives where God was present – where God’s grace broke through the situations they and others were encountering and the stories were powerful. We talked about times where God’s presence came into their lives when they didn’t know how they would go forward. They described times when they saw God’s grace help them deal with others and times when God’s grace lifted up those who were in pain or desperation. The energy in the room lifted as we told these stories.

In your lives, think about those times when you saw someone lifted out of their pain only by the grace of God. Think about those times when grace broke into your life when the right person showed up just when you needed them or when you heard how God’s grace came into another person’s life. Look for all the signs of God’ grace coming into our lives.

So in the story of biting snakes in Numbers, remember that God showed up. Remember what it says in Ephesians that we are saved by God’s grace and finally remember from our Gospel that “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. God loves us. God does not want to condemn us, but rather redeem us. Look for and hold on to all the ways that God is breaking to not just our lives, but other’s lives and let the presence of God’s grace remind you of God love for all of us and to trust in that love.

Read more at <http://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/of-snakes-and-things-john-c-holbert-03-10-2015?p=2#KGiuSwYHOYzPisJA.99>