

**LENT 4B – March 11, 2018**  
***The Antidotes for Snakes and Sin***  
**(Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-15)**

I don't know; it was maybe sixteen or seventeen years ago. Jeanette and the kids and I went down to Virginia Beach one summer on vacation. A member of our congregation in Pennsylvania had invited us down to her place. "Stay with me," she said, "and use my house as a kind of base of operations, and then do whatever you want to do and go wherever you want to go during the day. Don't worry about me." So we took her up on her offer and that's exactly what we did.

One day, for example, we went to Jamestown – the first permanent English settlement in America. Another day we toured Colonial Williamsburg. We also did some hiking on nature trails at a nearby animal preserve. And, of course, we took in all the sights and sounds of Virginia Beach itself as well. Most days we were gone from mid-morning to early evening and, therefore, were on our own for our meals. But several nights we made it back in time to eat supper with Karen and her son.

And it was on one of those occasions that we decided to barbecue together out on her back deck overlooking the canal. Her gorgeous beach house was a three-story affair with a large garage and storage space on the ground level. And as we walked around to the garage to get something that we needed for the barbecue – I can't remember what it was now – anyway, Karen suddenly screamed; this blood-curdling, hair-raising, scream. And then, in a panic, she pointed.

There, in the corner of her garage, was the largest *snake* I had ever seen! It had apparently come up out of the canal and found its way into her garage, and now that it was startled by all her screaming, it started panicking itself and slithering across the concrete floor frantically trying to escape. Looking back on it now, I think the snake was probably just as terrified of *us* as we were of *it*.

Karen just stood there, petrified, her hand cupped over her mouth. Jeanette, her maternal instincts kicking in, placed herself strategically between this huge snake and the kids. And *both of them*, looked over at me – as the only male in the group! – as if to say, “Do something about it!”

And I’m thinking, “What do I know about snakes? I’m just a kid from Jersey where the biggest snake I’d ever seen, outside of an exhibit at the Bronx Zoo, was the little garter snake my brother once found out in the back yard. *This* thing, however, was several feet long – or at least that’s how I remember it. And I had no idea if it was poisonous or not. Probably not, I thought. But it was long and black and slimy and menacing... And now it was coming directly for *me*!

You see, it wanted no part of Karen’s screaming. Nor did it want to tangle with Jeanette who was poised like a mother grizzly bear protecting her cubs. So the snake decided that the best option, the best way out of the garage was through *me*; the dummy who was just standing there, frozen like a mannequin.

“*Do something!*” they both screamed at me. To this day I don’t know if I responded to their screams to do something, or simply responded out of a sense of self-preservation as this long, black, slimy snake came slithering directly towards me. Quickly looking around, I grabbed the only thing I could use to defend myself, a flat-bladed shovel leaning up against the wall. And then, just as the snake attempted to scoot between my legs, I brought the blade down hard, as I tried to cut off its head...

Only problem was... I *missed*! And now the angry snake slithered off at high speed in the opposite direction *back* towards Karen, Jeanette, and the girls again. So I took off in hot pursuit. But, as the snake got closer to them, Karen screamed again as well – that blood-curdling, hair-raising scream – so the snake did another about-face and now started back towards *me* at the very same time that I was approaching *it*. With

no time to spare, I raised the shovel again, and brought the blade down hard. This time, fortunately, I hit pay dirt.

But one strike was apparently not enough. Pinned down by the shovel, the snake whipped back and forth across the concrete floor out of fear and anger. So once again I raised the shovel blade and brought it back down. And again. And again. And again. “*Die*, you stupid snake!” I cried out. “Die!”

(Sorry, you have to excuse my regrettable attitude and behavior against one of God’s fellow creatures. But you have to understand, it was in the heat of the moment!)

Finally... after about half a dozen strikes it stopped squirming and just laid there motionless. It was dead. And Karen and Jeanette and the kids looked over – relief and, if I might say so myself a bit of admiration in their eyes – at me; the *snake-slayer*! Although, in retrospect, maybe not so much admiration as it was a look of, “It took you long enough!”

Using that same shovel, I then scooped up that long, black, slimy snake, and carried it out and deposited it in the canal for fish bait. Snakes... Don’t know about you, but I hate ‘em; don’t have any use for ‘em.

And that feeling seems to be almost universal. I mean, almost no one, throughout *all* of history, in fact, has ever liked snakes. They’re pretty much universally despised, in other words,. Which, of course... *brings us* to today’s reading from the Old Testament book of Numbers...

We pick up the story as the Israelites, still on their way through the wilderness after the Exodus, are apparently getting a little impatient. As someone once explained why it was that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for so long, for 40 years on their way to the Promised Land: “Even back *then*, men wouldn’t stop for directions!”

The Hebrew word translated here as “impatient” actually means “to be short.” Sort of like how we speak of someone as being “short-tempered.” No patience. They want what they want and they want it *now*.

The only problem... is *who* they’re getting impatient and short-tempered here *with*. It’s Moses their leader, of course. But it’s also *God*. And maybe that wasn’t such a good idea. Because, what do we hear next? “Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many died.” You got it. *Snakes*. Poisonous snakes!

We’ll come back to the snakes in just a minute... But here’s the thing. This isn’t the *first* time that the Israelites complained about God and Moses. Not at all.

In fact, if we go back to Exodus 15, the Pharaoh’s chariots and men have just been drown in the sea, and the people are singing God’s praises. In verse 21, Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, even leads the women out and sings to them, “Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

But, then, just three verses later – *three verses, mind you!* – in verse 24, as the people are traveling through the Wilderness of Shur, they start to complain about the water. At first, there’s *no* water. But then, when they find some, they complain that now it’s *bitter!* In other words, they had just gained their freedom from the Pharaoh, and had escaped slavery in Egypt, and they’re already complaining! You were just slaves, for crying out loud! Doing back-breaking labor and suffering at the hand of a foreign king. And you’re going to complain about the *water!* Really?

You often hear that there are two kinds of people in the world; those who see the glass as being half full, and those who see the glass as being half empty. But, as Gene Gregory points out, there’s actually a third kind of person as well. It’s the complainer who grumbles that it isn’t *bottled* water!

And that's what we have here with the Israelites. Complainers.

But, okay, God sees to it that they are nevertheless provided for; that their needs are met. God shows Moses a piece of wood. Moses tosses it into the water. And instantly the water becomes sweet.

However, as we move now into chapter 16, the people start complaining all over again. This time about food. So God rained bread down on them. When the dew burned off in the morning, we are told, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground, says scripture.

“What is it?” they asked. “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat,” said Moses. And they called it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.

And, in the evening, quail came up and covered the camp for the people to capture and eat, as well. Quail and manna. God provided for them.

In the case of manna, there was always more than enough for each day, and an extra portion on the sixth day for the Sabbath. But, other than that, they could not save it up for the following day – unless it was the Sabbath – because it would be filled with worms and had become foul.

It was a test, of sorts, you see. God was saying to them, in effect, “Trust me, and I will provide.” And God did. They had quail and manna, all they could eat. But *still* they complained.

Robert Leroe writes about being stationed at Eglin Air Base in Florida, and standing in line at the mess tent. And he heard this disgruntled airman ahead of him say, “What? Lobster *again!*” In other words, some people will find a way to complain no matter what! They could have a suite at the Ritz-Carleton Hotel, and dine at a five-star restaurant, drive around town in a chauffeured limousine, and *still* find something to whine about. That apparently, was the Israelites.

And so, when we move into the book of Numbers, we hear the same thing happening over and over again. Complaining, murmuring, and grumbling.

Reminds me of a story about a monk who joined this monastery and took a vow of silence. After his first 10 years, his superior called him in and asked, “Do you have anything to say?” The monk replied, “Food bad.”

Ten more years go by, and once again the monk had an opportunity to voice his thoughts. He said, “Bed hard.”

Another 10 years go by, and again he’s called in before his superior. When asked if he had anything to say, he responded, “I quit.”

“It doesn’t surprise me a bit,” said the abbot. “You’ve done nothing but complain ever since you got here.”

And so now we’ve arrived back in chapter 21 of Numbers. The people speak against God and against Moses, once again complaining, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” And, again, about the food and water. “For there is no food and no water,” they whine, “and we detest this miserable food.”

Hold on a second. Did you catch that? In one breath, they’re saying, “There’s no food,” but in the very *next* breath, they’re complaining, “We *detest* this miserable food.” It’s gotta be one or the other, right? Either there’s *no* food, or there’s *miserable* food. Can’t be both.

But have you ever noticed that once people start complaining, they stop making sense? It’s as if they’re so focused on complaining that they’re not even listening to what they’re complaining *about* anymore! Or if it even makes any sense.

As Benjamin Franklin once said, “Any *fool* can criticize, condemn, and complain... and most fools *do*.”

In 1991, a man by the name of Robert Hughes wrote a book called *The Culture of Complaint*. His thesis was that we live in a culture in which we perceive ourselves as being *entitled* to having all of our wants and desires fulfilled. Sound familiar? Sounds just like the Israelites as well.

When that doesn't happen, however, we become “victims,” says Hughes. We whine and complain and grumble. Again, just like the Israelites in today's reading. What's more, we see it as someone *else's* issue that's caused our inconvenience, it's someone *else's* problem, according to Hughes. Who was responsible for all the Israelite's problems, both real and perceived? Why God and Moses, of course.

You know, we tend to think that it's being unhappy that leads people to complain. But it's actually the other way around. It's actually *complaining* that leads to people *becoming* unhappy.

And the Israelites are the perfect example; the poster children, if you will, of unhappiness as a direct result of constant complaining. Again, God heard their cries while they were slaves in Egypt and delivered them from bondage. He led them right out from under the nose of the mighty Pharaoh and led them through the wilderness, protecting and providing for them all along the way without fail. They have their freedom. They have the hope of the Promised Land. They have all their needs met, including food and drink. But still they complain. And, therefore, they're miserable.

Until the snakes come, that is. God is apparently been getting pretty tired and fed up with all this whining and complaining, at this point, all this murmuring and grumbling.

*However*, as Cameron Howard, who teaches Old Testament at Luther Seminary, points out, neither the narrator of the story in Numbers, nor

God, ever *explicitly* says that God sent the snakes *because* the people complained. She writes, “The narrative specifies that God sends the snakes, but never does either God or the narrator call the snakes a *punishment*; the people *themselves* draw that conclusion.

I kind of think it probably happened like this: The people, again, are whining and complaining endlessly, and all of a sudden they notice that some of them are dying of snake bites. Not too surprising, actually, when you think about it, given that they are out there in the desert where all *sorts* of snakes and poisonous critters are roaming around.

Be that as it may, it *does* make an impression on them, however, whether God intended it to or not. So they go to Moses (who now apparently is a pretty good leader, after all) and they say, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.”

In other words, it finally dawns on them that all their complaining and all their unhappiness is not because of anything that *God* or *Moses* did. Rather, it’s all about *them*; about *their* sin, about *their* lack of faith and vision, *their* selfishness and sense of entitlement; *their* self-centeredness.

And, not surprisingly, this is the very *last* record of their complaining in the entire book of Numbers. Interesting! Or, again, maybe not...

So, what’s the answer, what’s the cure, what’s the antidote? I mean God could have, if God wanted to, just say the word and that snake problem would have immediately gone away. Like maybe with a bolt of fire out of heaven or something.

But God didn’t do that. No, instead God told Moses to make a serpent out of bronze, and to mount it atop a pole, so whenever a serpent bit someone, that person could look up at the serpent of bronze and live.



Kind of an odd way of handling things, don't you think? But, then again, think of modern medicine, for example. In order to protect people from the flu, for instance, what do we do? We give them a flu shot. Right? And what is a flu shot? It's nothing more than a vaccine made of the killed flu virus. In other words, to protect *against* the flu, we use what actually *causes* the flu.

Poisonous snakes the problem? How about a bronze serpent as the cure?

In the Gospel of John, of course, the gospel writer quickly picks up on and builds upon this very same imagery when he writes, as we heard, "And 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."

A reference here, of course, to Jesus being lifted up on the cross; that Jesus' death was the "antidote" for sin and death, just as the bronze serpent, raised up in the wilderness by Moses, was the antidote for fatal snake bites and the *Israelites'* sin. As Patrick Wilson once put it, "The simple equation endures; the cure for snakes is a snake; the cure for human life is one man's life; the cure for death is death."

*Despite* all their whining and complaining and ungratefulness, God's love for the Israelites never wavered, never lessened. Through it all, God still loved them. When they encountered poisonous serpents out there in the wilderness, God healed them. And when they confessed their sin, God forgave them.

David Lose tells the story about a friend of his whose 6-year old son once protested and complained about his bedtime. Frustrated by his father's refusal to let him stay up later, the boy finally said to his father, "Daddy, I hate you!" The father replied, "I'm really sorry that you feel that way, Ben, but I love you."

Lose asks, “And what do you think young Benjamin said?” “Oh, it’s okay.” Or maybe, “Sorry, Dad, I love you too.”

Nope. Neither. When Lose’s friend told his son that he loved him, the boy yelled back, “Don’t say that!” Surprised, his friend continued, “But, Ben, it’s true – I love you.” “Don’t say that, Daddy” “But I love you, Ben.” “Stop saying that, Daddy! Stop saying it right now!” And then his friend simply said *this*: “Benjamin, now listen to me: I love you... *like it or not!*”

That’s what scripture tells us over and over again; in story after story. We may whine and complain and murmur and grumble. We may get mad, really mad, at God, and say all kinds of awful things *about* God. But, in the end, what God says to *us* – over and over again, in story after story, passage after passage, book after book in the Bible – is the same exact thing as that father once said to his young son, who complained and was mad about his bedtime, “Listen to me,” says God, “I love you... *like it or not!*”

Amen.