

Faith Mennonite Church
March 15 – Fourth Sunday of Lent
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Facing our sin, facing the cross
Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Snakes or complaining. If I had to choose between the two it would be a hard choice. I was raised by a woman whose fear of snakes probably ranks in the phobia category, so I was never encouraged to take any interest in snakes as a child – not even in the harmless garter snakes that occasionally hid in the tall grass of the vacant lot next door to our house. I don't fear snakes as my mother does, but I do not wish to meet them either.

Neither was I encouraged in the practice of complaining. This same mother, despite (or perhaps because of) having grown up in poverty, could always turn the most dire predicament or the lack of some necessity into a reason to be thankful. I didn't even complain about school lunches growing up! They were actually a novelty to me since my mother was the meat-and-potatoes-and-vegetable kind of cook and casseroles or "hot dish" never showed up on our table. So mac and cheese or tuna-noodle casserole or Spanish rice suited me quite well.

The children of Israel, wandering in the desert, ended up with both complaining and snakes. Only the former was by choice from their point of view. The story says that God brought on the snakes—poisonous snakes. But most of us have experienced at some time or other the poisonous effects of complaining. It only takes one person, filled with complaints, to spoil a work environment, a church community, or a family gathering. And if a whole culture takes to complaining, it creates a poisonous atmosphere where it is almost impossible to find creative solutions to problems or to encourage positive action for change.

Why are we humans so prone to complaining? It stems from disappointment, from things not turning out the way we intended, or from things taking too long. All of these were certainly true for the children of Israel in the wilderness. Disappointed? Absolutely! Things didn't turn out as they intended? You bet! Things taking too long? Right, again! Luther Seminary Old Testament professor emeritus Terence Fretheim describes the disappointment this way:

The wilderness wanderings, or at least their length and breadth, were a surprise to Israel. Instead of a land of milk and honey, they get a desert. The promise falls short. Deliverance at the sea leads into the godforsaken wilderness. The Red Sea seems but a point of unreal exhilaration between one kind of trouble and another, only the last is certainly worse than the first. Bondage with security and resources seems preferable to freedom and living from one oasis to another.¹

But none of these things—disappointment, unexpected or undesirable outcomes, or a prolonged time-table of discomfort—make complaining automatic or inevitable. It always remains a choice. And that choice depends largely on our willingness to see the momentary disappointment in a larger frame. What's the big picture? Where is God in all of this? Will I trust that God will bring me, bring us, through?

It's not very popular to talk about sin. And certainly it's not constructive to focus on sin if doing so means that we're focusing on the sin of another. But sin, in essence, is all about whether we will trust in God's big picture. It's a picture we cannot always see, but to which we commit ourselves by faith so that God in Christ can transform us, shape us for "good works" as the writer of Ephesians wrote. We sin when we turn away, when we let our fears, our hungers, our impatience become our focal point. We become self-centered rather than God-centered.

Becoming and remaining God-centered isn't always easy, precisely because God created us with choice. We're not puppets on a string. We don't live in a climate- and comfort-controlled universe. God never protects us from all harm nor snatches us out of the pain and tragedy that are woven into the fabric of our existence. But God is in the midst of that harm and pain and tragedy. God didn't remove the snakes in the wilderness, but ordered Moses to create an image of a snake that the people could look at and in doing so, find healing. The snake was a symbol of the poison of their complaining, but serpents were also

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, "Commentary on Numbers 21:4-9," workingpreacher.org 2009

a symbol of fertility and new life, in the shedding of their skins. The people were invited to look up and beyond their pain, to accept the transforming power of God.

When Nicodemus came to Jesus at night (which is the setting for today's gospel reading in John) he too came as one challenged to see the big picture. Something about Jesus was compelling, yet Nicodemus had trouble with the language of new birth. Like some of us who have grown up in the comfort and security of a faith or cultural or family tradition, it can be unsettling to shed our old skin and slither into a new reality. Jesus reminded Nicodemus of how Moses had raised a serpent in the wilderness for people to look at for healing. And just as confounding and paradoxical as that may have initially seemed to the wilderness wanderers, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he too would be "lifted up."

Now the Greek word translated as "lift up" (*hypsōō*) can also mean to "exalt." So we have what commentator Lance Pape calls a "theological paradox. [...] In terms of human agency, of course, the cross is a moment of profound humiliation and defeat. But in John's theological imagination, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension are collapsed into a single movement of divine agency: Jesus exalted by God."² It is this exalted Christ that the writer of Ephesians is referring to, and saying, that by faith we are seated with!

The good news is that, like the people in the wilderness and like Nicodemus floundering in his own spiritual darkness, we can look beyond the snakes that hiss complaints our way. They say: we're not where we want to be, we don't have enough, we don't have the body or the mind or the memory we wish for, we're not good enough, and on, and on, and on. Sin loves to grip us!

But we can raise our eyes from the poison to the Holy One lifted up, inviting us to shed our skins, to be transformed. This transformation comes not from lots of hard work and discipline (though they might be involved), but first of all, from fixing our gaze and orienting ourselves in trust toward the One who loves us regardless of where we have been or what we have done or how long we've complained.

Commentator Pape, who wrote of the dual nature of being "lifted up" – as shame and as exaltation, offered three ways that we become transformed as we orient ourselves in trust toward the Cross of Christ.

1) Placing our trust in this Jesus means withholding our ultimate loyalty and trust from other things that ask us to pledge our allegiance. Remembering that he was publicly executed as an enemy of empire, we must be honest with ourselves about the subtle ways we are complicit in and benefit from imperial coercion. The "lifting up" of Jesus on a Roman cross places ever before us the question of who we will serve.

2) Placing our trust in this Jesus means noticing that the new life Jesus offered was especially difficult for the religiously accomplished. We must repent of the ways our self-satisfied religiosity becomes a barrier to understanding the new things Jesus offers and asks of us.

3) Placing our trust in this Jesus means confronting the inconvenient truth that God's purposes for those God loves are not synonymous with our own common-sense values of happiness, health, and safety. The trail of faith that Jesus blazed reveals that, while there is nothing in this world worth killing for, there are things worth dying for. The "lifting up" of Jesus reminds us that the true life God has promised us is not the life that we can secure for ourselves through self-interest and caution.³

Our Lent journey of six weeks is thankfully much shorter than the 40-year journey of our spiritual ancestors in the desert. But the cross calls us to nothing less than a life-time of looking up toward the One who was lifted up. As we fix our gaze in trust on the Exalted One, may we be transformed and strengthened for "good works" – pledging allegiance to Jesus and his kingdom, being open to new ways the Spirit may wish to move among us, and examining what part of our privilege and security we are being asked to let go. Let us walk in the light.

² Lance Pape, "Commentary on John 3:14-21," workingpreacher.org, 2015

³ Ibid.