



“Face It”

Scripture – Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-21

Sermon preached by Tracy Keenan

Sunday, March 10, 2024

First of all, that passage is from the Book of Numbers. If you have never heard that passage before, you might think of God as some tantrum-ing toddler, sweeping the toys off the table in frustration. In fact, Jack Miles, an author, teacher, and former Jesuit, won the Pulitzer Prize for his book: *God: A Biography*, in which he explored the Old Testament as if it were strictly a literary work with God as the protagonist. It was a literary character study of the OT God.

What we have here is a snippet from the larger tale of the Exodus: escaped slaves wandering in the wilderness, complaining about the food. And God, who has brought them all this way, apparently has had quite enough, and sets the poisonous snakes on them. **At least, that’s the way they interpret the infestation.**

This is not the God we tend to describe. We prefer the words of the Psalmist where God’s steadfast love is from everlasting to everlasting. Merciful. But no two ways about it, the whiners have gotten on God’s last nerve. But are the serpents God’s nasty little trick sent in response to that?

I remember an Old Testament scholar, Don Gowan, saying once that the OT is not the story of God, but it is the story of the people of God and their understanding of God throughout the generations. They were whining. Then they encountered an infestation of poisonous snakes. The cause-effect connection was in their interpretation.

There are lots of situations in life where consequences seem to far outweigh the infractions. Conversely, there are also lots of situations where people skate away consequence-free from heinous actions. We might wish that God would smite evildoers immediately. (As long as they are someone else, right?) The Psalms have quite a few requests like that. But, for our purposes, the focus is not so much on the possibility of an angry deity who loosed a snarl of poisonous snakes on a bunch of annoying people who were lost and frustrated and very cranky. We could hamster-wheel on that all day long.

I would like to focus on God’s very strange and counter-intuitive resolution of this scourge.

Make a big old bronze serpent, God tells Moses, raise it up on a pole for everyone to see. When folks who are “snakebit” look at the big bronze serpent, they will live.

This is every bit as perplexing as the problem of the snakes itself. And it can’t just be a random fragment. It is referenced twice more: Once in 2 Kings, in the days of Hezekiah, the big old bronze serpent had to be broken into pieces because people were making offerings to it and worshiping it.

And then again, John’s Gospel alludes to it and compares it to Jesus himself being raised up on the cross. **This lifting up of something that is both a horror and somehow the path to healing is the part of these passages that calls us to explore more deeply.**

The people in the wilderness were frantic. Consider what happens when people are frantic.

When they think they know what should happen and it’s not happening. Stories are spun out, fear is mongered. Wild explanations trotted out and repeated and the vigor of complaining feels better than trying to work at what can help or heal, the community can become dangerous to itself. I think about this right now at this strange, pivotal point in our history. We are an anxious people. Perhaps at times frantic. Fearful. Certainly polarized. We complain a lot. Social media is full of rants. The news is slogged with opinions and forecasts. People sling half-truths around like gasoline in a room full of lighted candles. **Fear certainly seems to be winning.** And when fear has the upper hand, none of us acts faithfully or wisely.

In this story, by holding up the image of the issue, God is saying, “You have to face it.”

You have to face the source of the problem, face the issues.

Face the reality.

And sometimes the reality is going to be hard.

Sometimes it has to hurt in order to get better.

Before **an alcoholic or addict** can get help, they need to stop denying there is a problem. They need to face the truth that whatever they are using to numb themselves is calling the shots in their lives, and everything is revolving around it.

When people **deny that the Holocaust** ever happened, they are incapable of seeing that it could happen again, hiding their eyes until it’s too late.

Before people can effectively **address racism**, they need to stop denying that racism is still marbled through our society like gristle. Trying to pretend that it is only a thing of the past makes the problem worse and hinders our coming to a place of healing and making things right as a nation. Yes, acknowledging the truth can be painful, gut-wrenchingly painful, but unless we face it squarely, we cannot get past it.

Now, I know that you here at Westminster are deeply invested in the healing of this world. You actively work to dismantle structural racism, eradicate systemic poverty, and seek to enhance congregational vitality, just as our denomination’s Matthew 25 movement urges. I applaud you for that.

So rather than this being a sermon that preaches to the choir, where we all shake our heads at folks who deny racism or blame the poor for their own generational poverty, **let's ask where this slithery story is seeking to touch our own lives.**

Where are the daunting issues, the hard parts that we would rather avoid?

It could be our aging. (Anyone here aging? Anyone continually surprised that you are aging?) Possessions that have come to possess us. (Clutter, anyone?) It could be our egos. Those shadow selves that accompany us everywhere, easily taking offense or getting defensive, wanting the world to revolve around us, identifying us with the things that are not our *Image of God* Essence. We could slip through life without ever addressing these things, but in truth, they can entangle our feet and bring their own reckoning, especially when they prevent us from being **the people God calls us to be in a world that is spinning** into chaos and anger.

We Christians need to do our inner work to empower us for wise and faithful outer action.

Hermann Hesse, the great novelist from the 20th century, wrote: “You know quite well, deep within you, that there is only a single magic, a single power, a single salvation... and that is called loving. Well, then, love your suffering. **Do not resist it, do not flee from it. It is your aversion that hurts**, nothing else (epigraph before chapter 6 of Kristin Neff’s *Self-Compassion*.)

This is not suggesting we should all become masochists. Don’t place yourself in pain intentionally. But – when there is something unavoidable painful, something that needs to be tended, ignoring it or denying it is no help whatsoever. In fact, denying it can make it worse.

I remember hearing **Brené Brown** giving a talk. The topic was doing the hard work – I don’t even remember what the hard work was that she was referring to. (Note: I have tried to find her quote online, but I can’t find it. Apologies for that.) But it frankly doesn’t matter. It can pertain to whatever the hard work is that is necessary and which we are avoiding because it’s hard and it is likely to be painful.

She said something to the effect that it was like being at one end of a **swamp** and knowing that you need to cross to the other side. There is no way around. You have to go across the swamp. Except you don’t want to. So you stand there. You make excuses. You think of other things to do. You shift your weight from one foot to the other. Suddenly, you realize that you are standing in quicksand.

By the time you get help to get pulled out of the quicksand, you could have been all the way across the swamp. And you still haven’t done that. Trying to avoid facing the difficulty makes it much more difficult.

A wise person I knew once said, “the only way is through. There is no way around.”

This is true for having that hard conversation. This is true for grief. It is true for avoiding looking at the places in our souls where God is trying to do some spiritual surgery.

I think of Jesus, facing his own death on the cross. If he was going to stand for God’s love no matter what, he was going to have to face this suffering. There was no way around. There was only through.

Not because God was angry. Not because God was tantrum-y. Not because God had a score to settle with us. But because God so loved the world. The judgment described there in John's Gospel is the judgment we choose for ourselves. Hiding our deeds, our thoughts, our prejudices, our hatreds, perhaps even from ourselves, denying that we are complicit in any of the world's troubles or that God can work through (even) us to being Shalom.

But if we can only do the painful work of looking— Opening our eyes. Becoming aware. Awake.

Become willing to do the hard work of facing the pain. **And open to what lies past that pain** – we can live into the work of resurrection. We can be the people God is calling us to be in a world that needs us to bring our best wisdom and faithfulness now, perhaps, more than ever.

Healing Prayer ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Creator of the universe and Source of our lives, you gave us the healing ministry of Jesus. He opened the eyes of those who were blind and helped them envision a path to adventure and joy. He touched those who were ill and made them feel vibrant and whole. He forgave those who were captives of guilt and freed them for new ways of living. He engaged people who were tormented by internal demons and liberated them from destructive behaviors. He encountered men and women whose spirits were dead and resurrected them to hope-filled lives.

Mighty God, our world is desperate for healing. Fatal diseases rob us of our loved ones. Illnesses of the mind alienate victims from society. Racism divides communities and gives rise to injustice, violence and hate crimes. Terrorism and war spread mayhem and extinguish innocent lives. Greed drives many to become callous to human needs and some to destruction of your creation.

Loving God, you call us together in the Body of Christ and plead with us to continue the work Jesus began. Give us the will to follow the teachings and example of Jesus:

- by visiting one who is ill and touching her with love;
- by listening with undivided attention to one who needs to unburden his soul;
- by speaking kindhearted words of welcome to one who is shy and lonely;
- by expressing our compassion to one who is grieving;
- by standing with victims of crime or oppression and advocating for justice;
- by being good stewards of your creation and repairing the earth;

God, when we reach out to those yearning to be healed, we pray that our expressions of love and concern may work in harmony with your Spirit that is within them. May our connection with your Spirit, arouse their resolve to live as fully as possible.

Weeping God, open our eyes to individuals who are wounded. Although we feel inadequate and insufficiently trained, you have given each one of us in this sanctuary gifts of healing. Grant us the resolve to touch the lives of others with your love and the assurance that when we minister to anyone in need we touch *your* heart and soul.

Gracious God, if *we* are the ones in need of healing because we are facing the dreadful consequences of bad choices we have made, or we have been harmed by the cruel actions of others, or we are the innocent victims of a defective gene or an accident of the universe, help us to be open to whatever healing and transformation is possible. May we not worsen our lot by rejecting the assistance of others or by resisting new ways of living.

Now, we pray together the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, saying, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.