

*A Serpent in the Wilderness (Or, What I Wish I'd Said A Year Ago)*

I do not like yard work.

I'll do it, but I reserve the right to complain about it.

Despite this reality, we once bought a house that had been neglected for a while. There was a boxwood hedge that I think was planted in 1957 and hadn't been pruned since. Redbuds had been allowed to range out of control, and there was one particular feature I detested: a low, stacked stone border that only served to make it difficult to mow the grass, or rather, the weeds.

It made no sense whatsoever in the yard, so it had to go.

I don't care for yard work, but I am married to someone who *really, really* doesn't do snakes.

I'll give you one guess what likes to hang out in sunny, rocky places.

The wall sat there mocking us as we contemplated what to do about the snakes.

The solution I ultimately engineered was to take a hoe and sort of yank the rocks back off the wall while standing several feet away, primed to run hell-for-leather if necessary.

I like to think that stable people have a reasonable fear of snakes.

What an odd story today!

Moses prays to God, "What are we going to do about the snakes?"

Our story unfolds in a predicable way for anyone who knows Moses: The Israelites had yet again grown cantankerous on their journey to freedom. Throughout their wilderness journey, the Israelites raised whining to an art-form.

For the most part, God seems to exercise something of a sense of humor it - if one has created the universe from nothing, then sustaining a rag-tag army of Hebrew peasants through a few generations of nomadic existence is really not a heavy lift.

Even still, the Israelites struggled to maintain a sense of trust.

They complained about water, so God provided water.

They complained about food, and God gave them Manna - though only enough for a day at a time. They must trust that God will provide.

They complained about the steady diet of manna and in a comic interlude God doesn't just provide quail for the Israelites, God does it almost like a genie in a lamp, "You want meat? I'll give you meat. I'll give you so much meat that it'll be coming out of your noses."

And then their camp is overrun with birds.

God seems perpetually patient with their lack of trust.

(Though, perhaps the real story is that every time Moses and God got away alone, they both let loose what they were really feeling.)

Now the Israelites are grouching again. They are carping on the lack of variety in their diet. They let loose a string of claims about things being better in the past, about God not really stepping up to the mark in leading them, and that it really wasn't so bad back in slavery in Egypt, and they are utterly unconcerned by the fact that everything they are saying is demonstrably untrue.

Have you ever known that type of person?

There are always pot-stirrers; it's a fact of life, and the one thing they all have in common is that they are toxic to any group when they steal control of the narrative, because nothing will ever be good enough.

Here in *Numbers*, they have done it again.

This time, God is not amused.

Finally, God loses patience with this whole endeavor of shepherding the people to freedom.

Notice that Moses and God have a tempestuous, volatile, emotional relationship.

They are engaged in a constant battle of protecting God's people from themselves, and the stress shows from time to time.

God demands that the worship of the people be focused on God, not on themselves.

That is, after all, what idolatry is in the final estimation - worshipping ourselves, because we decide what is God. And that's toxic because we are finite, and therefore prone to failure, if for no other reason than that we come to an end.

For this reason, the eternal God demands that the people give up their idols.

When they persist in trusting in the objects and machinations of their own making, from time to time in the book of *Numbers*, God throws a little a little TNT into their incense.

This time, it is not quail that overrun the camp, it is *snakes*.

Now, remember: the book of *Numbers* wasn't written in real-time.

Nobody in the Israelite camp, looking around and seeing a slithering mass of snakes straight out of Indiana Jones, whipped out a papyrus and took down notes for posterity.

Indeed, Old Testament scholar Dennis Olson writes this about the book of *Numbers*:

"The book of *Numbers* was the product of the Jewish Community's struggle to understand the pain and punishment of exile and its implications for Israel's relationship to God, Israel's definition as a people, and Israel's posture toward the promised land, which had been lost but was now about to be regained."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Olson, *Numbers* in *Interpretation*, Mays, Miller and Achtemeier, eds. (JKP: Louisville, 1996) p3

In other words, *Numbers* was part of Israel's attempt to understand what went wrong in their history.

Now, isn't that relatable?

If *only* I had done that... What if we'd had the presence of mind... If I had it all to do over again, I'd... fill in the blank.

As the Israelites told their stories over and over to themselves while they were in captivity in hopes of understanding where they had been as they sought to enter into a hopeful future.

A recurring theme emerges: They failed to trust God. They failed to trust the love of God. They failed to trust the promises of God.

Over and over, they sidetracked themselves with idolatries and machinations, over and over they tried to yank back control of their lives from God, as if such a thing can be done.

Does that sound like a familiar refrain?

In the garden, they wanted to know good and evil... for themselves.

In the wilderness, they melted down their gold and made a calf... for themselves.

How about you?

Have you ever tried to manage the whole universe yourself?

One of the lessons I've had to learn over and over again is that I am not particularly effective in managing the universe.

Perhaps that's a bit of a platitude, but it's a lesson that humankind has been learning over and over and over again.

How often do we say, "Lord, if you'll just get me through this, I'll handle the next one myself?!"

I'm sure the Israelites found plenty of snakes in their wandering in the wilderness, but these snakes are different.

These are the snakes of relying solely on ourselves.

These are the snakes of believing that we are better at managing the universe than God is.

These are the snakes of choosing to believe a false narrative despite all evidence to the contrary.

And *these* snakes bite.

But the thing about the snakes in this story is that in the symbolism of ancient Mesopotamia, the snake can be a symbol for evil and chaos, and the snake can *also* be a symbol for fertility, and life, and healing.

What seems to make the difference is the posture of the person to the snake.

A snake on the ground is a snake of chaos and evil.

But a snake on the pole is a snake of healing and rebirth.

And do you know what the difference is?

Well, *Numbers* is pretty clear: it's our posture.

Are we looking down, fearful, mistrustful of God's blessings, and obsessively seeking to manage everything to the 'nth degree?

Or are we looking up, relying on the goodness of God, and trusting that in the grace of God, an abundant life is unfolding before us.

In *Numbers*, it's all about *trust*.

Don't get me wrong, I do catch the whiff of prosperity Gospel wafting through this interpretation: Just trust in God and all will be well. And if you don't trust in God, the snakes will bite.

But that's not what the story actually says, is it?

The story never said that those who were looking up at the bronze serpent didn't get bitten, it says that they were *healed*.

That is the good news of the Gospel: Not that we don't get bitten just like everyone else, but that we are healed.

That is the story of the Gospel: Not that Jesus avoids suffering, but that all of the suffering of Jesus is redeemed in the resurrection.

John's Gospel is big on signs.

When Jesus is deep in a conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus, he returns to the image of the snake on the pole as a metaphor for the endless love of God for creation. 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."

Then he says those words of hope: *For God so loved the world...*

If anyone is clinging to the notion that God visits hardship on us to punish us for things, just keep reading. It is the very next verse where Jesus says, "Indeed, God sent not the son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved."

Again, Dennis Olson, "The cross in John's Gospel, like the pole with the bronze serpent, signifies both the poison of death as well as the life-giving power of God for all those who believe and look to God for healing and new life."<sup>2</sup>

What makes the difference?

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 139

Our posture.

I get that the snake story says God sent the snakes because God was mad. But remember: The Bible is a great library of faith perspectives. That's why we have to keep reading when we see something like that. One author rarely has the whole perspective – and in Genesis 12, we find where God made a covenant with the world not ever to visit destruction on us. As I said last week, we don't weight everything the same when we read the Bible, *and a covenant always outweighs a story*, even when the story is a parable seeking to understand the events of life.

And that brings me to what I wish I'd had the prescience to say a year ago, and it's written all over this story: Whatever else God did, God never abandoned the people. God never gave up on them. God just kept plugging away, and when snakes of doubt, and fear, and toxic self-reliance slithered in, God gave Moses the solution.

And yes, Moses did have a few choice words for God about the experience.

Years ago, I was taking a class on pastoral care-giving, and my dear friend Lillian McAlister said something I've never forgotten. After I'd related a situation where I was at a loss for what to say to a care receiver who was so angry at God over the loss she had experienced that words failed her and I had nothing to offer, Lillian said, "Well, tell her just to say that. You think God can't take it? God is big; God can take it."

When Moses put the snake on the pole, the Israelites had to return their focus to God.

The cross does the same thing.

Do you know the difference? Ax bronze serpent is never anything more than a talisman – but the cross?

Well, that's a different story, isn't it?

Or maybe it isn't.

The cross is all about *God*.

It is all about God's love.

It is all about God's endurance.

The whole story has always been about God.

And in the light of the cross, we may have meaning – indeed, abundant meaning – and life.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.