“Snakebit”

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I love to preach about God’s love for us. Last time I preached it was about rainbows and the sun always shining on us. But that is not what scripture said as I read it this week. It brought me a different kind of word. So buckle up. This is God’s word for us today.

What do you see when you look up at the cross?

The ancient Israelites were a complaining group of people in the Numbers passage, weren’t they? They said, “We have no water and food, and by the way the food that we said we don’t have, it’s no good!” That doesn’t even make sense!

The Israelites were unhappy with the timetable and amenities God was providing for them. Yes, they had been released from slavery in Egypt. Yes, the waters of the sea had been parted so they could “mosey” on across to freedom. Yes, they were given water and bread each morning, and a clear set of rules to live by, and a pillar of fire to follow. In the verses right before today’s story the Israelites were given by God total victory over the Canaanites.

But the food wasn’t to their taste. The towels weren’t soft enough. The pool temperature was a tad too cold.

And God was probably thinking, Oh, so what I give you—life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—that’s not enough? You don’t like what’s on the menu so you send it back to the kitchen? Total victory isn’t good enough for you to say thank you? I remember now--your faith is so weak that you need to SEE your god so you make a golden calf to worship?

We do like God with skin on. Worshiping something “out there” that we can’t see, feel or touch isn’t as satisfying.

Many ancient cultures worshipped snakes. Snakes were believed to have special medicinal powers. And this story may be about God showing the Israelites that God is ahead of snakes on the power depth chart. God sends the snakes. God sends the cure. God realized that we human beings need our gods to have skin on them. So we got a bronze snake to look up to and be healed. But the cure didn’t come from the bronze snake. The cure came from God and God alone. “Make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.”

Fast forward 1250 years or so to the book of John, Chapter 3. “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believe in him may have eternal life.” After more than a thousand years, human beings were still complaining, still sinning, still choosing darkness over light, sickness over health, death over life. So God upped the ante. God sent God’s own self, God’s son Jesus Christ, not just to represent God with skin on but to be “God with skin on.” And again, God offered us a cure, that all who look at him, who believe in him, who choose to follow him will move from darkness to light from sickness to health, from death to life.

What do you see when you look up at the cross?

I see God with skin on. I see the ultimate sacrifice, unbounded love, unconditional forgiveness. The cross is a beautiful thing to behold because it represents all that can be between God and us.

But I also see more. Every time I look at the cross I also see the sins of humanity that put Christ up on that cross. And I don’t see the sins of humanity restricted to the Roman Empire or Organized Religion in the year 30. I see our sins still hankering to put Christ up there. We are still trying to crucify Jesus. And it can be very hard to look at the cross and recognize both the forgiveness and the sins that the cross represents.

The Israelites had life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and they complained about the quality of the food. Did they pray, “Thank you God for safety from our enemies, for our tightly-knit community, for basic sustenance and for your guidance?” They complained.

The leaders of the Roman Empire and the people in the crowd who chanted “Crucify him! Crucify him!” were not praying, “Thank you God for stability of government, for our health, our families, for the love we find in relationships.” They complained. Jesus was breaking the rules, the rules that made the Jewish leaders feel safe. Jesus healed the sick on the Sabbath and dined with society’s outcasts. Jesus was gathering crowds and preaching about putting God and one other ahead of material goods. He blessed the imprisoned and the meek. He spoke against the values of the Roman Empire.

It was the sins of the people in the year 30 that put Christ up on that cross: their pettiness, jealousy, greed, their need for hold on to power.

The people of the world demanded blood and God responded not by sending snakes but by Jesus going willingly to the cross. The people thought they needed a show of might, but what God sent was the ultimate demonstration of vulnerability, forgiveness, mercy and love.

Scripture tells us, “Those who do not believe are condemned already.” Of course we are! When we are thinking only of ourselves, when we speak poorly of others, when we lack generosity, when we take the Lord’s name in vain rather than revering God, when we lie directly or by omission, when we don’t use the gifts we’ve been given in service to God’s kingdom—when we do any of those things, we are condemning ourselves. “For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light so that their deeds may not be exposed.” We are the walking dead when we choose sin over what we know to be right.

“But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” When a jeweler gets a diamond, she holds it up to the light to look for flaws. In the light all is revealed and true value can be determined. When a diamond is in the light it SHINES.

What do you see when you look at the cross?

It’s not easy to look at the cross. When we look up all of our flaws, all of the things that put Christ on that cross are revealed. It takes courage to look at our sins and name them. My friend who grew up Roman Catholic said the toughest part of her week was sitting down with the priest and naming out loud all of the sins she had committed. It’s hard!

Earlier in worship we had a silent time after our group confession. It was an opportunity for each of us, individually, to name our sins. To confess every single thing we had done wrong and put it into the light. To hold up our flaws and let the light of Jesus Christ shine through them, erase them, make us whole again.

For God so loved the world—that each and every one of us—that God gave God’s only Son, so that everyone who believes in him—everyone who has seen the light—may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world. God could have sent snakes or an earth covering flood or an eternal fire—God sent the Son so that the world might be saved through him.

Lent is a time to examine the sins that put Christ on that cross. The need for power. The banishment of people we don’t deem worthy to the margins of our society. The cutting talk, the angry retort, the eye for an eye mentality. This time of the year is when we are to look deep inside ourselves and identify what similarities we have to the Ancient Israelites, to the Roman Empire and to the first century Jewish establishment.

Lent is a time to recognize that we continue to try to crucify Christ. If we aren’t nailing him to the cross ourselves, we are at the very least cowering in the courtyard beside Peter, denying him over and over so that our safety, our way of life is maintained.

Let’s muster up the courage to look squarely at the cross. Acknowledge the sins that put Christ there. Speak them out loud, put them in the light. And then accept the unconditional forgiveness that the cross also represents. Grace abounds. We don’t have to be walking through life snakebit. We can choose light. We can choose life.

What do you see when you look up at the cross? Amen. [Numbers 21: 4-9, John 3: 14-21]