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Preached at Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church, March 15, 2015

“Snakes on a Plain”

Numbers 21:4-9

Ephesians 2:1-10

There is not much that scares us more than snakes. On any list of “Top 10 Phobias,” there they are, right next to spiders and flying and the dark.

When Samuel L. Jackson signed on to make the movie *Snakes on a Plane*, his agents wouldn't agree until they added a clause in his contract that the actor could not be within 25 feet of a live snake. It's a specific fear – and sometimes it's a fear that makes good sense! – and somehow we use the image of a snake to stand in for all of our worst fears. All the way back to Eve in the garden, the snake is a symbol of nothing less than all the sin of humanity.

That's a lot of baggage to put on one reptile, especially since a lot of them are harmless!

And so that story from Numbers makes us really uncomfortable, to say the least. We're used to stories that start out with the Israelites complaining in the wilderness (there are a lot of those), but then God reacts by sending poisonous serpents, “so that many of them died,” and what are we supposed to do with a God who would send something so deeply terrifying after us?! There are enough awful things in the wilderness already, and isn't God supposed to be comforting?

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Last weekend, a few of us attended the annual Presbytery Beach Retreat, this year hosted by the Speer Trust. There were three speakers, and more workshops, around themes from evangelism to one called “Healing Historic Harms.” One of the speakers, Bob Lupton, is the author of the book *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help, And How To Reverse It*. We spent the weekend examining, or (mostly) resisting examining, the negative impacts of our words and actions, even (or especially) the well-intentioned ones.

It was a difficult weekend at some points, as we got close to some touchy subjects and started to ask one another to consider that some actions might not be as “good” as we thought they were. And it's one thing when we're talking about the actions of “the Church” as a whole, almost theoretically, but it's a whole other thing to consider our individual work and the programs that are dearest to our hearts and identities as “good Christians” and the particular words that we ourselves have used. That hurts, because that feels personal.

“But I thought I was doing everything right!” “I didn't *mean* to hurt you!” “Well if we're not supposed to have a soup kitchen then what else is our church supposed to do?!”

These issues are many-layered and complex; too complex to be solved in one weekend or captured in one sermon. And they require some serious soul-searching for us – not just honesty but also the willingness to look critically at our actions and our priorities and to see the places that need to change.

And that's kind of terrifying, if we're doing it right. That means apologizing for things we didn't even know were bad. That means recognizing that our whole worldview has gaps in it, and those gaps are not just neutral space, but those gaps in our understanding are often actively doing harm in ways we hadn't even considered.

And even once we start to consider a new dimension beyond what we had seen before, suddenly there's another dimension beyond that, and one connecting them slant-wise, and then layers of history going back beyond that, coloring present reality and circling back on itself in ways we never knew. It's overwhelming, to say the least, and these conversations will push all our buttons sooner or later; because when it comes down to it we're being asked to confess some very specific sins. We're being asked to look straight at them, because as long as we continue to ignore them, we'll continue hurting one another.

It is only by naming our sin, and the fear from which it comes, raising it up before our own eyes and to God, and looking straight at it, that we might be healed.

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In this season in particular, we examine ourselves, we confess, we draw closer to God. And we do this not just because it's a good thing to do – we journey through the wilderness of Lent because we know that this journey ends in Easter. That at the end of all this penitence is rejoicing; that this confession ends with forgiveness; that all this death ends in resurrection.

We are beset by vipers and snakes of all kinds, whether we are starving in the wilderness or lost in the middle of a crowd. Our deepest fears come after us, fears of not being enough and not doing enough, of not being able to provide for the ones we love and of not being good enough for the ones we love. And they come slithering after us with the faces of rattlesnakes and asps, and we are trapped like Indiana Jones dropped into the Well of Souls, face to face with a spitting cobra.

We can't escape the snakes – not in this world, at least. But God, in whom we put our trust, brings us face to face with those fears and brings us safely through. God commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent and lift it up, and all who looked at it were healed. The very thing that was coming after the Israelites in the wilderness, that is the thing God uses to heal them, the people God had promised to protect.

It was their lack of trust in God, the story goes, that brought on the snakes to begin with. But it is their specific repentance, and the renewal of their trust that God will indeed provide, that ultimately saves them – not just from the snakes but from Egypt out into the wilderness and all along their journey, even as they complain and whine and forget to trust that God really is with them.

We don't like to think of a God who would send out venomous snakes to kill people who sin, and so we have difficulty with this story sometimes. We can tend to allegorize it as the gospel of John does, and

claim that the snake on the pole prefigures Christ on the cross. Both are powerful images – shocking images – and we’re perhaps equally uncomfortable with both of them in the modern day.

And while I’m skeptical of readings that claim to find Jesus in texts written centuries or millennia before his birth, there is some resonance to be found in the image of a brutal fearsome death held up before the people which somehow – against all reason or logic – brings healing and wholeness.

Because the cross to which this season inexorably leads is just as scandalous, just as counterintuitive, as a God who would send venomous snakes after God’s own chosen people.

And yet we still, then as now, live in a world of crosses and snakebites. Many of those, in fact, have been brought about by our own sins, as much as we might not want to admit that. Our greed and our willful ignorance, our pride and our collusion with the powers of this world – these bring death as surely as any cross. Our actions and non-actions mean starvation, thirst, suffering, death for those in wilderness places.

Our repentance *is* needed, not just for us but for the good of all God’s people. Our heartfelt and specific repentance helps for the healing of our own wounds and of those wounds we inflicted, intentionally or not.

And we are invited into a new way of being. We are offered the gift of God’s grace, not just as some sort of Get-Out-Of-Jail-Free card, not an excuse to just keep doing what we’re doing, good or bad. But God’s grace is offered to us so that we might be able to look with honesty at the things we’ve done wrong, hold them up to the light and then be healed. It is a fresh start; a chance to recognize where we’re on the wrong path, and set off down a better path.

As the writer of Ephesians puts it: you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world. All of us once lived among them, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, has saved you by grace through faith, and *this is not your own doing*. It is the gift of God, and not the result of your works.

For we are what God has made us, he says. We are not saved by our work, good or bad or unintended. But by God’s grace, we are offered an alternative to the world of backstabbing and betrayals, of poisonous creatures and petty grudges, of fears and anxieties and insecurity that tramples others in our desperate attempts to escape. God’s pattern is love, and trust, and the security of knowing that we are children of God no matter what happens.

We are saved not by being taken out of the world – we will still face wilderness times and times of temptation and hurt, and snakes both literal and metaphorical – but we are saved by placing our trust in God, over and over again, in the astounding and irrational grace with which God loves us, somehow both forgiving us and challenging us to do better.

Because that grace is the invitation to a new path. We can leave our old patterns behind, because God has set out a new life for us: a life of healing, of trust, and of doing God’s good work not because we are looking to get anything out of it, but because of joy in God’s ways.

Friends, we have nothing to be scared of. We are loved by God with an everlasting love, no matter what we do or don't do; we are loved.

Thanks be to God.