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Numbers 21:3-9, John 3:14-21
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Dangerous Love

Today's Old Testament and Gospel readings both refer to snakes, a snake being lifted up on a pole to be precise. Not the most pleasant image for the first Sunday of the spring.

One of the most important pastoral visits I ever made came the summer after my first year in divinity school. I was working with eight little churches down in the Eastern part of the state. One evening I received a frightening phone call from Ms. Lorna Jordan across the street. I rushed over to her house eager to offer my priestly assistance, wizened by an entire year of seminary education. When I arrived her face was sheet white. Without saying a word she handed me a broom and pointed at the ceiling of her porch. I looked up and saw the biggest black snake I had ever seen wrapped around the porch beam, its beady eyes already locked on me and my sad little broom. It stared at me. I stared at it. It stuck its tongue out. Ms. Jordan was nowhere to be seen. I noted the irony that a basket of apples sat on the table to my left and made a hasty promise to myself that no matter what the serpent said I would not eat one. Fortunately, the snake made its own slithery way out a crack in the upper-wall of the porch, liberating me from playing the broom-wielding-hero I was so eager to play. Ms. Jordan, who I found locked in an interior bathroom, assured me it was the best pastoral care she had ever received.

The Old Testament and Gospel lessons connect familiar images from across the bible, images both terrifying and comforting. The Numbers passage talks of snakes, sin, and death, all language we have heard before, back in the opening chapters of Genesis when Adam and Eve tangle with the snake in the Garden. The Gospel lesson tells us of God's love for us and how through God's gift of Jesus to the world we are rescued from sin and death brought on by Adam and Eve's Garden of Eden disobedience. John tells us the Son of man will be lifted up like Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. The ancient image of primordial fear, the snake, and the promise of God's lavish love in the Gospel of John, go hand in hand in these two passages. In the bible, as in our lives, danger and love frequently dwell together.

John's Gospel opens with Jesus alluding to this odd scene in the book of Numbers where the Israelites have gotten mixed up with a den of serpents out in the desert. It is not a pretty picture. Moses has led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Day after day they have been tramping around in the desert with God providing manna to eat and Moses at the helm. Weary and frustrated, not at all sure where they were going or if their leader Moses knew what he was doing, sure they were about to die, dissension has grown in the ranks. The "Let's go back to Egypt committee," gets wound up. "Let's go back to Egypt!" they whine. "Slavery in Egypt was bad but it was better than freedom. With freedom comes too many choices," they cry.

I have a pastor friend who says every church he's ever been a part of has a "let's go back to Egypt committee," a group of people who are opposed to any sort of change and always want to go back to the way things used to be.

That's when God loses his cool and sends a pack of poisonous serpents into their midst. You may remember the scene from *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Arc*. Harrison Ford and his companions have landed in a snake pit while hunting the Arc of the Covenant. After lighting a lantern and seeing the thousands of serpents of all kinds crawling over them and no immediate way out, Indiana Jones boldly whispers, "Just remember, they are more scared of us than we are of them!"

Not so with the serpents God sends after the Israelites. Many in their number die before the "let's go back to Egypt committee" convinces Moses to change God's mind. Moses crafts a poisonous serpent made of bronze and lifts it high on a pole. All the Israelites who had died were given new life, and every time an Israelite was bitten by a snake, all he or she had to do was lift up their eyes to the serpent and be healed.

It's an odd way for God to show God's love and mercy to his people, granting healing through pain, by lifting high an image of ugliness and death to bring about new life. As I learned on Ms. Jordan's front porch, it is a terrifying sight, staring into the eyes of a snake on a pole. No wonder the Israelites were horrified.

Anyone who has had surgery at Duke Hospitals knows something about the terror and healing of snakes on a pole. The American Medical Association adopted the image of the ancient Sumerian God of Healing, two snakes intertwined on a staff. Sometimes when you go to the hospital they have to hurt you before they can heal you. Danger frequently paves the way to new life. Remember that. Often an image of ugliness and death can be the means to wholeness.

And with that we are back to John's Gospel, where we hear perhaps the most famous verse in all of scripture. John 3:16.

John 3:16 is everywhere in our culture, on bumper stickers and bookmarks. It shows up on brightly colored signs at basketball and football games. I even saw a big bald guy once who had John 3:16 tattooed across the back of his head. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him would receive eternal life." For those who believe, life will come from the Son of Man who is lifted high, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness to give life. The gospel writer is foreshadowing the cross and resurrection of Jesus. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son to the world, Jesus who will be lifted high on a cross, and lifted higher on Easter morning.

Thus the story John's Gospel tells is really the story of God's love for us. It's a story about how God gives God's heart to the world in Jesus and how he should be received by those who believe. The Gospel says whoever believes in him will have eternal life. In the Bible, to "believe in something," is not to make a heady assent to an intellectual claim. "To believe," means to hand over your whole being, to give your heart.

You don't have to live very long to know that giving your heart, loving someone, is dangerous. Giving your heart to someone is a radical act of vulnerability, no less so for God. The moment you have uttered a few small words, "I love you," you have handed your heart to someone else, and in that moment two things can happen.

They can receive it gently, hold it, care for it, give their equally fragile heart to you, or they can drop your heart and watch it shatter into a million little pieces. To love at all is to risk being shattered. Not to risk love is to go through life fully protected and fully alone. You may remember the scene in *Good Will Hunting* where the bright college-age Matt Damon character, who has brilliant intellectual capacities but is incapable of truly giving himself to another person, is confronted by the Robin Williams mentor character following another intellectual defense against loving someone, “That’s great Will, keep it up, that way you can go through your entire life fully alone without ever giving your heart to anybody.”

Admittedly, a shattered heart is not a pretty thing, it bleeds all over the floor, it causes horrible pain, but a heart that is shattered becomes softer, more aware of the pain of others. If wounds don’t turn to bitterness, wounds in the heart can become the place where God works to bring about tenderness, kindness, and move us to compassion. A broken heart might just be the place where new life begins to spring forth, where we find redemption and salvation.

Even if love is returned we are far from safe, because love quickly can become disfigured and shattered in other ways. One of the dangers in loving someone is we tend to love the other for what we want him or her to be. We impose on the other our preconceived notions of who they should be, or what we expect them to do, rather than loving them for who they are. The other becomes not the beloved, but a project to be fixed or a problem to be solved, a way for us to express our own insecurities and perceived needs. This is a selfish kind of love, a utilitarian kind of love. It is a way of turning in on ourselves because we fall in love with our own images and ideals, rather than receiving the other for who they really are with all their annoying habits and stunning beauty.

This sort of love can happen in all kinds of relationships, not only romantic ones. Friends, roommates, teammates, colleagues, classmates, parents and children, we frequently try to re-make the other in our own image, to see the other as a problem to be fixed rather than receiving them as a gift. Students may recognize this distorted form of love when they feel pressure to live out the expectations that others have for them, when they are pushed to study something they don’t really want to study or take a job they don’t really want to take because someone else tells them what is best, rather than feeling free to be who they are and do what they most deeply desire to do. Jean Vanier says, “To love someone means to reveal to them their beauty and value, to say to them through our attitude: ‘You are beautiful. You are important. I trust you. You can trust yourself.’ To love someone is not to do things for them, but to reveal to them their capacities for life, the light that is shining in them.” This is the way God loves us, by trusting us rather than controlling us, so that we can begin to trust ourselves.

Authentic love then begins in seeing clearly. What do you see in the person you love? Who are they? What are the qualities that they have that you love about them?

Not the ones you wish you could fix or make better, but who they really are in all their brokenness and beauty? Love is about seeing truthfully. Like Jesus being lifted on the cross, love lifts us up. Love gives us a richer experience of life. Without love, as the Matt Damon character discovers, we miss out on the pain, but we also miss out on the glory. Without love we miss out on the agony of the cross but we also miss out on the joy of the resurrection.

Remember, this is God's love story. When Jesus says, "God so loved the world," Jesus is asking us to see God truthfully. Not to impose on God our notions of what we believe God could do or should do, not to remake God in our own image, but to take God for who God is. Sometimes it's hard to know with Jesus whether love feels like dying or being lifted up, like the cross of Good Friday or the glory of Easter Morning. Danger and love always go together in life with God. The Gospel of John suggests that the love of Jesus comes to us like a snake. It is dangerous love, the love-bite of Jesus. Only anti-venom made from the same poison can bring salvation to the victim.

We're deep into the season of Lent now, that 40 day journey into the desert of our sin and barrenness of our souls, and Jesus says the answer to our wandering in the wilderness is when the Son of Man will be lifted high on the cross, the love of God given for the world, love that was too much for us to handle. Rather than receiving the heart of God, we tried to remake Jesus in our own image, to see him as a problem to be solved and a project to be fixed. And when that didn't work, we reached for a club to kill him. We spit on him, whipped him, lifted him up on a cross and shattered the heart of God into a million pieces.

The equation is not complicated, though it's hard to get our minds around. The cure for a snake is a snake. The cure for human life is one man's life. The cure for death is death. The cure for love is love. Nothing less will do.

Lift up your eyes to the cross, and give him your heart.

Amen.