

A Sermon for Robbinsdale United Church of Christ
March 22, 2009
Rev. T. Michael Rock

Scripture Readings:
Numbers 21:4-9

Sermon Title: "Watch Out For the Snakes"

(open with prayer)

Isn't it great how ancient stories lead us to present wisdom. This is indeed one of the oddest stories in all of scripture. It is a part of the "murmuring stories" in the book of Numbers. It is the fifth and last of these pieces where the people complain and whine to Moses that they want to go back to Egypt where everything was normal. They want it back to where it used to be. It is probably confusing to us to imagine a group of folks in a religious community struggling with change. Can you imagine wanting to go back to the way things used to be?

In regards to our church?

Our country?

Our world?

There is no going back. And why would we want to? In every era for every group and for every country there has been some sort of degree to separation between the rich and poor. There has been hatred, fear, prejudice and pain in every time and every place. If the future was about healing, why would anyone want to go back? If the future was about justice, why would anyone want to go back? If the future was about safety, peace, and no more need for separation from God and one another, why would anyone want to go back?

It was true in the desert journey for the folks in our story and it is true for us. There is a struggle that goes on during a time of change. It is not unusual or surprising that complaints happen.

The role of the preacher in this case is to be the scout or advance person. It is what Moses did with his brother Aaron. Aaron comes back with word of the promises of God being made real. On the other side of the desert was a fertile land, a great river, and sure enough, milk and honey. No foolin'. Once you see what I see, everything else will have been worth it. The future of this people looks amazing, but before we get there, we will have to struggle a little bit. In fact, if we fight the change, it will not only take us longer to get there, but there will be even more suffering.

So, even with this clear promise and equally clear warning, the people still complain. I guess I can understand a little bit. Even though there are promises and faith and love to go around, change is a loss of control and there is a certain element of fear. That's where this story is so amazing. The snakes are what people fear. 36% of all people in the latest research are afraid of those slithering beings. The number jumps to 83% when you've got poison involved. In this story, the people complain and are literally bit by their fear. They are poisoned by their fear. Some even are killed by their fear.

It is the fear that drives them and clouds their vision and takes up all their energy. So, it makes sense then that there are two antidotes to fear. Perfect love casts out all fear is one, but I don't think the folks are ready for that one yet. The second is the one that always comes from God in the midst of fear and change. The other antidote to fear is freedom. Your choice. You are confronted with fear and suffering and God intervenes with a choice. Continue on the path of fear and pain and death, or confront that which you are most afraid of, and be healed.

Moses takes the snake, the symbol of fear and fashions the healing icon. Come to the snake and be healed. This offering is free to everyone. There are no barriers to this healing, the only requirement is that you find meaning in it. Recognize those words? It is your choice. Not mine, not the prophets and not the priests. The choice is yours. Look at the snake and live.

- Parallel of Jesus.
 - Death to life – face your fear. Look upon the cross, imagine your own death, and let go of the fear.
 - Suffering to hope – Witness the pain, hear the cries of the refugee and the victims of war and famine, cry with them, feel with them, and build a better way.
 - Fear to love – The way to love unconditionally is through facing our fear, and saying “I CHOOSE LOVE”

Lent is about a confrontation with our suffering, our fear, and our separation from God. It is about preparing for change. The path to that change lies in covenant. The healing for our journey comes in the words of prayer hanging over you.

Love
 Acceptance
 Forgiveness
 Love
 Peace
 Understanding
 Love
 Forgiveness

These are the promises that we have shared and the promises that will we have been given. Living these promises will take us to a place that we have never been before, and it will be amazing.

We will be filled, we will be healed, there will be no more war, and prejudice and hatred will exist only in history instead of on the nightly news. The land we are going to is the promised land. It is filled with milk and honey. Sweetness abounds. Come. Be healed. Release from fear and choose life.

AMEN.