

*May God's word only be spoken here and God's word only be heard, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.*

I can identify with the Israelites. They're stuck in the wilderness, they feel lost and directionless, they've left Egypt and seem not to know where they're going. And it seems forever ago that they left Egypt. Suddenly the life they left behind seems rosy and comfy. Mind you, they were slaves, and hated it when they were there. And they complain that there's "no food and no water," and yet in the next sentence they acknowledge that they just don't like the food they have. Just like when I say I have nothing to wear, but am looking at a closet full of clothes! Complaining is a theme that runs through their wilderness experience. And it's hard to see God's abundance in the midst of their trials.

And so God sends punishment, slithering, biting, poisonous snakes, for their whining, and then provides redemption, a bronze snake on a pole. Snakes are both the suffering and the deliverance. 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. A paradox. It doesn't make a lot of sense.

[As I have been struggling with today's texts, I have been struck by the several paradoxes in them. Snakes are both the problem and the solution. The wilderness is a dreadful and desolate place and not one wants to be there, but it is the only way to get home, to the Promised Land. God loves us in spite of our sins. Jesus' suffering and death on the cross is the way to our redemption.]

Life is full of paradox. And most of us struggle with it. We want, expect life to be straightforward, we want to be able to explain everything, we want to understand, and we cannot. We expect, I think, that if we follow the rules, life will turn out okay. And sometimes it does, but sometimes it doesn't. But that doesn't keep us from trying.

Last week (today) we read the Ten Commandments, in which we heard the prohibition against making idols. I sometimes think we make God in our own image – in essence, an idol – by expecting God to respond to us the way *we* want. We want God to give us a snake-free life, and when our lives are not problem free, snake free, illness free, we wonder if God is asleep on the job. We wonder if God cares. We complain, like the Israelites, we rant and rail, we try and understand, and cannot.

[Like the Israelites, we want a God that we can understand, that we can predict, that we can comprehend, and the God we have is beyond comprehension, beyond explanation, beyond definition. Our God is a God of paradox, a God of mystery.]

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 is everywhere in our culture, on bumper stickers and bookmarks. It shows up on brightly colored signs at basketball and football games. "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 *whole* world in Jesus and how he should be received by those who believe. It's a story of God's extravagant and profligate love for all of God's creation, *the whole world*. But God's love for us came with a price, Jesus' death and resurrection.

On Good Friday, the disciples fled. Jesus had not turned out to be the Messiah they expected. Jesus had not overturned the occupying Roman authorities and reinstated Jewish rule. He had not established the disciples as leaders of a new Israel.

Oftentimes we don't find the God we expected. We are hoping for a God who will help us through our difficulties and problems, or who will make them go away, and instead we get a God who accompanies us through our troubles, who walks with us through our crises. We get a God who carries us through, rather than fixes, our darkest times. And we get a God who says to us, as God said to the 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic Julian of Norwich, "all will be well, every manner of thing shall be well." In other words, "don't sweat the small stuff. I'll take care of it. Just know that I love you."

Accepting and living into God's extravagant and abundant love for each of us is often harder than discounting it altogether, and claiming that it isn't real. It is *not* a promise that we'll be problem free and pain free in our lives. It is a promise that God's love will carry us through our problems and troubles. God promises, in Jesus, that each of us is loved and cared for beyond our wildest imaginations. That while we face trouble and pain, God will carry us through and bring us out on the other side. That while we get snakes in our lives, those snakes may even be our salvation.

Years ago, in the months after my ordination as deacon and as I was preparing to be ordained a priest, while learning two new jobs, my father was dying. I was in NJ and my father was in MI. It was a very hard time, being away from him, trying to learn a whole new life, trying to support him, my mother, my sisters, pay attention to the students and the congregation where I was serving, and of course, paying attention to my husband and daughters. During this time, a wise man from my sponsoring congregation said to me, "One day you'll be grateful for this time. One day when you're pastoring someone whose loved one is dying, you'll look back and be thankful for this time, for this experience." I thought David was crazy. That he was totally off his rocker. How could I ever be grateful for all this pain, upheaval, all this distress in my own life while trying to take care of others?

But indeed I was. And have been more than once. Out of the pain of my father's death, I grew and learned. Out of that tumultuous time learning new jobs I grew. Out of those snakes in my life, I learned to see God's presence and promise. Out of that difficult time, I learned to empathize and be with persons who were suffering such losses. Of that experience I learned to trust God's love for me and for everyone.

As I go through this time of my mother's death, and try and figure out what it is I am supposed to be learning, David Sayles' words come back to me. And today's Gospel that reminds me how much I am loved, and how much God cares, how much love I am receiving and experiencing through this time. And I am grateful to you. And I remind myself again how little I understand. Lord I believe, help my unbelief. AMEN.