**Numbers 21:4-9**

**Ephesians 2:1-10**

**John 3:14-21**

Our first reading this morning is very strange. It tells how the Lord sent poisonous snakes to punish the Hebrews, wondering in the wilderness, because they complained about the food God was miraculously giving them – manna by day and quail by night. When they started dying of snakebite, they regretted those complaints and repented. They asked Moses to step in; the Divine Voice told him to make a serpent of bronze and position it on a pole, so that when the people looked at it, they would not die if they had been attacked by a snake. Very strange.

Have you ever noticed that as soon as something goes wrong, God gets the blame? And when everything goes well, God gets little of the credit. I find this to be the general drift of human thought, especially among those who have never wondered about inviting God into their lives. These are the ones who say in the aftermath of natural disasters, “Why didn’t God stop this hurricane or tsunami or earthquake?” Or, “Why did God let this happen?” Similar accusations arise following human-made disasters, like school shootings or acts of terrorism. “Where was God?”

I find this to be the drift of human thought, but that needs to be qualified. It is how we think in the Western world. The West has been *culturally* conditioned by the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All three stress a personal relationship with God – the Divine Life – Utter Love. The sacred texts of all three traditions document the involvement of Divine Love with humankind.

This is good! This is very, very good! The nature of Divine Love is that it wants to give and bless and be involved with – be in – us! In all of Creation. This is relationship, or relatedness. And relating-to tends to be very, very hard.

And because we are Human, we have no other way to relate except through our humanness. That means we project our humanness onto our relationships. People say their pets are their children and often treat them like little people. My mom named her 1950’s Mercury sedan *Beulah*. I named my first car *Amos*. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with this. If anything, it is one of Humankind’s more whimsical traits – that we tend to endow objects and other creatures with our own qualities.

For the sake of relating to, even Jesus urged us to project our humanness onto God by calling God *Father*. “Father” indicates deep relatedness. Jesus was able to do this because it grew out of his Jewish sensibilities. We see those sensibilities of ascribing human ways to God in our first reading.

We have God acting in a fashion very consistent with how we Humans act. I don’t know about you, but I don’t like a lot of complaining, especially when the complaints are about me! The people in this story could have easily imagined that their complaints *annoyed* God – a very Human reaction – who then sent snakes to punishment them.

Let’s apply a little bit of impartial research to see if we can “save” God from the effects of this story. We need to understand it in a new way; we need to understand that God is not out to get us, especially for something as menial as complaining about the limited menu.

The fact is, snakes are prevalent and deadly in the Middle East. As recently as ten years ago a British newspaper reported: “Swarms of snakes are attacking people and cattle in southern Iraq as the Tigris and Euphrates rivers dry up and the reptiles lose their natural habitat among the reeds.” [[1]](#footnote-1) As long as one hundred years ago another author wrote: “The valley seemed creeping with horned vipers and puff-adders, cobras and black snakes. By night movement was dangerous; and at last we found it necessary to walk with sticks, beating the bushes on each side.”[[2]](#footnote-2) That came from T.E. Lawrence, better know to us as Lawrence of Arabia.

There’s another interesting fact in the story. It is the ancient belief that the exact image of something could be used to control it. The image of a noxious creature could drive off that creature. This is called *sympathetic magic* and it sheds some light on why Moses made a bronze serpent: to repel snakes and to cure those who had been bitten.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We have a lot of elements at work in this story. Complaining people; poisonous snakes; regret and repentance; a remarkable leader who saves the people using the very thing that was tormenting them. Now we have something we can work with. The story is mythology that teaches us deeper truths about who we are and who God is.

It teaches that the Divine Life is inclusive of all life and that the means of inclusion is relationship – how we are included in God and in the life of others is through relationship. The story teaches that we are limited and prone to all manner of limitations like complaining but that our relationship with Divine Love does not have to be as limited as we are. The key to an abundant kind of relationship with God is found in how the people reacted to the snakes. I am certain that God did not send snakes to punish them, but that’s what they thought. Then they had to determine why they were being punished. To do that, they had to self-reflect.

They had to look inside themselves and gain some painful self-awareness. “We have complained,” they said. No one told them this – not Moses; not God. They intuited that they had damaged this relationship with Divine Life by something they had done. That is being self-aware. The degree to which we can relate successfully is the degree to which we are self-aware. The capacity we have for relating to others, ourselves, the Creation and even God is determined by our self-awareness and self-honesty.

Lent is a time when the church asks, “Do you want more of God?” Are you satisfied? Do you have enough transcendent, unimpeachable love in your life and soul? What we learn today through Sacred Text is a lesson in love and relating. It is a lesson consistent with the Lenten message of repentance. We can’t repent until we know what to repent of. That requires awareness of self and soul.

In a few minutes the Lenten liturgy will guide us to kneel and offer us with a superb check list of human limitations. These are your tools for self-awareness. Allow them to sink as deeply into your unconscious as you can because we can’t repent until we know what to repent of.

And while we can truthfully repent of many items on that check list, the grand-daddy, over-arching core of is this list is that we repent of having a too-limited relationship with God.

1. Patrick Cockburn, “As Iraq runs dry, a plague of snakes is unleashed,” http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature, June 14, 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Quoted by Patrick J. Willson, “Snake on a stick,” *Christian Century*, March 2,1994, p. 223 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Karen Randolph Joines: “Bronze Serpent in Israelite Cult,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, September 1, 1968; p. 256 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)