

Sunday, March 15, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Serpent on a Stick”

When things get really bad, when you feel overwhelmed, when anxiety starts creeping in and taking over, where do you look?

Do you look to your friends?

Do you look to food or shopping?

Do you drink or sleep or exercise?

Do you look down or do you look up?

Our Hebrew bible reading this morning came from the book of Numbers, the fourth book in the Pentateuch – the five books of the Jewish Bible.

Numbers is the story of the people wandering in the wilderness.

By the time we get to chapter 21, many of the people who had come out of slavery in Egypt have died and the new generation is not appreciating the hardship of finding their way to the promised land.

They start complaining, not just about their leader Moses, but about God.

God sends snakes to bite them.

I know that seems a bit harsh – but the whining Israelites get the message and ask Moses to intervene with God and get rid of the snakes.

God, in what I think is a particularly clever move, agrees to stop the snake biting.

He orders Moses to make a serpent on a stick and hold it up for people to look at.

In order for the people to be healed and set free from the snakes they must look up – toward God – and be reminded by the serpent on the stick what happens when they don't trust God.

I picture them for years to come, as someone starts to complain, whispering among themselves, “Don't forget the snakes.”

Jesus thought this story was so powerful that he used it to describe the life of the spirit to Nicodemus.

Now Nicodemus was a powerful man, an educated religious leader.

He surely knew the story about Moses and the snakes.

Jesus uses the ancient tale to explain his own existence on earth.

God has sent him from above, not to destroy anything, but to remind the people to look up.

Jesus has been sent to live among us as the serpent on the stick.

He is the one to whom we must look to be healed and restored.

He is the one, similar in appearance to the biting sinners, but different, sent from God to make things right.

Staring up at the serpent may seem like idol worship, but as Religion Professor Paul Kleim writes:

“Even if God is pure spirit our encounters with the holy are always physical. We touch the divine through the mundane – sensing the boundless tangibility of the cosmos, straining against the limitations of timing and spacing. We create shrines wherever our awe is especially intense and stock them with ritual objects that help us focus our attention, deepen our reflection and reconstitute our commonality.”

Scholars point out that a key to both stories is the willingness to admit what plagues us.

To find healing the Israelites had to “look up” to the bronze snake.

This was an act of repentance, turning their eyes from the fiery snakes, to the God who had cared for them for decades and now offered them healing.

Those who love darkness, says Jesus, will not look up to him when he is lifted up, because to do so would take repentance and an admission of their need.

Those who are unashamed and willing to come to the light will look up and find life.

In the same way the Psalmist tells that those who rebelled but then repented found healing and were forgiven and saved.

The Lenten message for us today is that God forgives and restores after we repent.

Jesus Christ gave everything he had on that cross and nothing less is expected of you.

Repentance means taking responsibility for our sins.

Repentance means acknowledging our own brokenness.

Repentance means humbly recognizing that you stand in need of God’s mercy and forgiveness.

First we confess.

Second we repent.

Third we seek forgiveness and mercy.

Fourth, God’s grace restores us to right relationship.

There are no shortcuts.

The gift of grace is not available to those who don’t look up.

Every follower of Christ has a daily choice to live in the darkness of denial or the light of repentance.

We can choose to know the salvation of God's healing and restoration, or stay in the poisoned wilderness of our own fear, pride, and selfishness.

One writer described, "In this way, the call to repentance is not a "hellfire and damnation" message, but is an invitation to grace, to discover that there is nothing that can keep us from God's restoring mercy, or from God's liberating forgiveness. If we will just open ourselves to this truth, we will find the abundant life we seek by turning from our darkness, and moving into the light of truth and of God's love. Once again, the choice is ours."

Being a Christian is hard work. It is so much more than coming to church on Sundays – singing a few hymns and saying a few prayers.

To truly be Christian, you have to give your whole self – heart, mind, soul and body over to God.

You must surrender everything you are and everything you have to the one who created you.

When things get really bad, when you feel overwhelmed, when anxiety starts creeping in and taking over, where do you look?

You look up. You look to the cross of Jesus Christ and you remember that 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only son.'

I want to close with a prayer written by a student at St. Peter's Seminary in Ankawa, Northern Iraq, where Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) provides English teachers.

The student is among the Christians who fled from Karamlesh, in Iraq's Nineveh Plain, as the Islamic State group advanced:

"As you carried your cross, O Lord, we carried it too.

We lost everything except the cross hanging around our necks and in our cars.

We looked at this cross when we were forced to leave our houses.

It is the cross of the pain and the hope, the cross of the sadness and the hope, the cross of the resistance and the steadiness of those who endure injustice but respond to it in love, even when we feel that the injustice is increasing.

We carried this cross from our lands in Nineveh to other lands and we still hang on to it.

In spite of all this, you can see the smiles on our faces;

you feel the goodness of our neighbors.

We are full of hope and trust in you O Lord."

Amen.