

The Fourth Sunday in Lent - Year B
March 22, 2009
The Reverend Amy H. Morehous

“Snakes. Why Does It Always Have To Be Snakes”

In our Old Testament reading today, we get a brief section from Numbers, a very strange story indeed, somewhat divorced from its context in the full story of the sojourn in the wilderness. The Hebrew people hadn't been able to cross through Canaan, because they disobeyed God's instructions one too many times. God's response is swift. “None of the men who have tried Me these many times and have disobeyed Me shall see the land I promised on oath to their fathers; none of those who spurn Me will see it.” (Num 14:22-23).* “Your carcasses shall drop in this wilderness, while your children roam the wilderness for forty years, suffering for your faithlessness.” (Num 14:32-33)

Now the people are nearing the end of their 40 years in the wilderness, and their leaders begin to leave them. Moses' sister Miriam dies, and the water dries up. The people rebel yet again, crying out against God. Moses and Aaron beseech God for help in finding water, and God gives them instructions to bring water from a rock. Moses and Aaron seem to take credit for producing water from the bare rocks themselves, leaving God out of the picture. As punishment, Moses and Aaron are denied the chance to cross into the promised homeland. Aaron dies, and the nation is so grief-stricken that it drops everything and mourns for 30 days, instead of the traditional seven.

Now we come to today's part of the reading. The Hebrew people are again on the move. They are forced to make their way around Edom, after being denied the easier route through the Edomites' land. They are tired from their journey, frustrated with Moses' leadership, and have had enough of God's daily providence. “There is no bread and no water, and we loathe this miserable food.” This miserable food – it should be noted – is the manna God has providentially provided his people – exactly enough for each day. No more – no less. Enough manna comes in the morning for each day – any manna hoarded by the people rots and becomes infested with maggots. (Except for the manna which falls before the Sabbath day – then a double share falls, in order to sustain the people through their day of rest. Even during an exile in the wilderness, God and his people rest on the Sabbath.)

So, from this place, the Hebrew people look back to the easy days of their comfortable captivity. Sure, they were slaves back in Egypt, but at least the meals were tasty! Who minds a set of shackles, when the water in the well is clear, cold and free-flowing?

Lost in the desert, unsure of their destination, feeling abandoned by God, unsatisfied with their leadership, obsessed with looking back to the 'good old days,' missing their comfortable lives.... Does their wilderness begin to sound familiar?

So what does wilderness look like for us, these days? It's easy to hear it – all you have to do is turn on the news. According to the Pastoral Letter released this past week from the Episcopal House of Bishops, our wilderness looks something like this:

- *In the United States there is a 30% reduction of overall wealth, a 26% reduction in home values and a budget deficit of unprecedented proportions.*
- *Unemployment currently hovers at over 8% and is estimated to top 10% by the end of the year.*
- *There are over 8 million homes in America that are in foreclosure. Consumer confidence is at a 50 year low.*

Unparalleled corporate greed and irresponsibility, predatory lending practices, and rampant consumerism have amplified domestic and global economic injustice. The global impact is difficult to calculate, except that the poor will become poorer.... A specter of fear creeps not only across the United States, but also across the world, sometimes causing us as a people to ignore the Gospel imperative of self-sacrifice and generosity, as we scramble for self-preservation in a culture of scarcity.

So here we are, stuck, unsure of our future, angry and fearful. And here come the snakes. Snakes biting at our ankles, snakes that burn, that kill. Full of fear and pain, we confess our sins and our doubt. "We sinned by speaking against the Lord, and against you!"

We have too often been preoccupied as a Church with internal affairs and a narrow focus that has absorbed both our energy and interest and that of our Communion to the exclusion of concern for the crisis of suffering both at home and abroad. We have often failed to speak a compelling word of commitment to economic justice. We have often failed to speak truth to power, to name the greed and consumerism that has pervaded our culture, and we have too often allowed the culture to define us instead of being formed by Gospel values.

We can look back at the past, look at the place from which we have come...and that place looks pretty good, compared to the way things are today. Sure, we were in captivity...but it was a comfortable captivity. Slaves...you don't think we were slaves? Slaves to the newest, and biggest, the boldest, the first, the best? Who minds a set of shackles if you have the most toys, the best hair, the most beautiful lawn, the fastest car, the perfect set of abs, the most beautiful wardrobe? When we come to the end of our days, have we really somehow convinced ourselves that God will give us a better place in line if we show up with the most stuff? We should have been building relationships with God, and with each other. Instead we seem to have built mini-storage warehouses, and shopping malls.

Everyone is affected by the shrinking of the global economy. For some, this is a time of great loss - loss of employment, of homes, of a way of life. And for the most vulnerable, this downturn represents an emergency of catastrophic proportions. Like the Prodigal who comes to his senses and returns home, we as the people of God seek a new life. We recognize in this crisis an invitation into a deeper simplicity, a tightening of the belt, an expanded Lenten fast, and a broader generosity. God's abundant mercy and forgiveness meet and embrace us, waiting to empower us through the Holy Spirit to face the coming days.

Amidst our fear, and our poor choices, and our doubts, we are held captive by the set of shackles – shackles that we inadvertently forged ourselves. We have looked to things we thought would fulfill us, only to find ourselves empty. In the midst of our mistakes, and our suffering, and our emptiness, we are told to look up, and to be saved from our sin. Look up at a figure raised high on a staff. Or is that high on a cross?

Jesus makes the allegory plain in his midnight conversation with Nicodemus. “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” The contrast in the passage is between everlasting life and perishing. To perish here means more than physical death – in the original it's a complex word that has the sense of being completely ruined or destroyed and thus to die. In context here, the word has the sense of completely, absolutely missing what God designed our lives to be.

Now, more than ever, we are a people who need to look up, and hope. We are a Lenten people, people who need to feel God's grace, forgiveness and warmth. Our spirits yearn to be what we were created to be - a free and redeemed people, a people of Easter hope.

In a time of anxiety and fear the Holy Spirit invites us to hope. Anxiety, when voiced in community can be heard, blessed and transformed into energy and hope, but if ignored, swallowed or hidden, fear and anxiety can be corrosive and lead to despair. We Christians claim that joy and hope emerge for those who have the courage to endure suffering. ... Our current crisis presents us with opportunities to learn from our brothers and sisters of faith in other parts of the world who have long been bearers of hope in the midst of even greater economic calamity.

We can also learn from our spiritual ancestors, (the Hebrew people), who found themselves in an economic and existential crisis that endured for forty years - on their journey from Egypt to Israel. ... After their groaning, complaining and reverting to old comforts of idol worship, they were given Grace to learn and understand what the Lord wanted to teach them.

They learned that they needed the wilderness in order to recover their nerve and put their full trust in God - and to discover their God-given uniqueness, which had been rubbed away during their captivity in Egypt.

As we go through our own wilderness, these spiritual ancestors also point the way to a deep and abiding hope. We can rediscover our uniqueness - which emerges from the conviction that our wealth is determined by what we give rather than what we own.

For the remainder of this Lent, if we want to give something up, I challenge us to give up fear. Fear of being not good enough, smart enough, pretty enough; fear of not doing enough, having enough or being enough. Give up our delusion of earning enough, accumulating enough, or achieving enough. Let enough be the new enough. Stop looking down at the snakes that bite at our ankles, that burn and kill, that divide us from a relationship with God and with each other. Clearly, the snakes will still bite, but they cannot kill our souls, or diminish our spirits. Look up toward Christ, a Christ raised up on the cross, and returned to life. Let go of our shackles, look up, and rest in the grace that is freely available, that is lovingly offered to all God's children. "This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." Give up your fear; put on grace. Put on your own unique self – just as you were made by your Creator - a Creator who loved you into being here - on this Earth, at this time, in this place.

As we continue our Lenten journey together we place our hearts in the power of the Trinity. The God who created us is creating still and will not abandon us. The Incarnate Word, our Savior Jesus Christ, who in suffering, dying and rising for our sake, stands in solidarity with us, has promised to be with us to the end of the age. God the Holy Spirit, the very breath of God for us and in us, is our comforter, companion, inspiration and guide. In this is our hope, our joy and our peace.

Amen

Sources:

- Hebrew scripture citations taken from the Tanakh translation © 1999, Jewish Publication Society.
- Quotations in italics taken from "A Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of The Episcopal Church meeting in Hendersonville, North Carolina, March 13-18, 2009" and available in whole form at http://www.episcopalchurch.org/79901_106036_ENG_HTML.htm