

Snakebit in Paradise – Lent4B

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous god, punishing the children for the iniquity of their parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

That's what we heard last week, and we'd hear it every week during Lent if we were doing the Penitential Order And it's a mighty big threat – or, as the tough guys in the movies say, “It's not a threat, it's a warning.” Before we get into today's scriptural challenges, let's make an observation or two about that 2nd Commandment. First of all, it's ridiculously illogical. There haven't been anywhere close to a thousand generations since Moses -- more like a couple hundred -- and in just 20 generations, each one of us has over a million ancestors (of course lots of these connections are the same person, but that is a discussion for another meeting). The point is, everyone has at least one bad apple in the family barrel every few generations, so we're all fairly recently descended from at least one godless and sinning individual (maybe we are that person ourselves) and thus we are all subject to punishment for their iniquity. Is God really saying that out of my eight great-grandparents, it only takes one bad apple to have pre-ruined everyone in my generation? Or is it the case that one really well-behaved ancestor can cancel out all the naughty ones forever? Neither of these scenarios provides us with much of a grace predictor; it looks like our fate is up to us.

Secondly, how do we even think about this commandment in terms of the God that we like to envision, the God who came to us in Jesus, the God who is love? This grudge-bearing vindictiveness and wild threatening sounds like some other god, one we would like to avoid altogether.

Yet we cannot ignore these stories, nor escape the need to reconcile their particulars with our daily challenges; we cannot deny that Jesus himself is known to have lived in and loved much of this tradition.

Which brings us to today's readings. Moses and his crowd are extremely uncomfortable in the wilderness. The people are complaining, not just about Moses, but that God's very self is incompetent, inconsiderate and obsolete. Then there is an infestation of snakes that the people, in their discomfort and hysteria attribute to God's jealous anger. This is their view of the World: If things happen in Nature that are bad, there must be a moral reason. Yesterday, we were walking on the headland – a beautiful sunny day – and we veered off the path to get a closer look at a colony of red-winged blackbirds nesting in a big meadow. Here in gopher territory, it's a good idea to look where you're stepping, for the sake of your ankles, but even so, you can still come within one footfall of stepping on a big fat rattlesnake all curled up and happy in the grass. It was a very close call brought about, like the Israelites' predicament, by our straying from the instructions we'd been given. We skedaddled back to the path and stayed thereon thenceforth, giving a wide berth to the area now known as "Rattlesnake Alley."

After their close call, Moses makes for his people a bronze serpent and sets it on a pole. The story says God tells him to do this. Not quite sure how we know that God told him; the story

is in the third person, but presumably only Moses knew what God really said to him. It doesn't matter. Moses prayed for the people, and this was the result of his prayer. The people were sick – with snakebites, with discontentedness, with fear of death. When they looked at the serpent on the pole, they got better.

Remember St. Paul's famous observation: "The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak?" Over the years, we have come to identify that word 'spirit' with morality and obedience of the rules, prayerfulness and godliness. Whereas 'flesh' has been assumed to refer to all of our animal instincts, specifically to the evils associated with unmediated human instincts – which are worse than almost every animal's. The big seven: Pride, Anger, Greed, Gluttony, Lust, Envy, Sloth. Paul is saying that our spirits are not naturally nasty, but are indeed mostly oriented in the right direction. And these spirits of ours reside in, and are part of our flesh (where else would they be?) but because our flesh becomes hurt, tainted, flawed, snakebit and fearful from time to time, we can't act as our spirit would have us act.

So Moses builds his bronze serpent as a reminder of who we are, and what we are capable of, not as an idyllic replacement for God. Whether or not God ever actually sent or took away an infestation of snakes is not the point. The people had to be reminded that the health in them came from God, and it was a spiritual health that could last far beyond whatever the world put them through. That's why the symbol for the healing arts, the medical doctor's emblem is a snake on a pole. It's not that the snake heals, it's that the snake points to the healer. So, in the second Commandment, when God reminds us that families can get sick and stay sick for generations without help, it's not really a threat or a warning, it's an observation. On the other hand, when cultures and peoples follow their healthy

orientation towards godliness, spiritual connectedness and love, they develop hope. Hope is the only practical explanation, the only conceivable image for that phrase 'a thousand generations of steadfast love.' It also helps when you stay alert and look where you're going, especially if you're veering off the beaten path.

Which brings us to Jesus. We must recognize, look to and venerate the cross, not as a form of god in and of itself, or a place we want to end up ourselves, but like the snake on the pole for the wandering Israelites: a reminder of the source of our health, a trail blaze pointing to the founder and facilitator of our well-being and our natural hunger for sweet charity; pointing to our best path. It is through our self-identification as very members of the body of this fallen, risen Christ, walkers on this way together that we continually reestablish our identities as saints of God. Our spirit may be willing and our flesh indeed weak, but sometimes the spirit gets a little unwilling too, and in need of a reminder. It is belief in the healing power of Christ's word, the practice of self-examination and self-forgiveness plus a few handy reminders of just who God is, that will always combine to carry us out of whatever wilderness we're wandering in today. And, as my grandpappy always liked to say, "Any day without a snakebite is a good one."