

ON LENT, SERPENTS AND ROTTEN VEGETABLES

Sermon for Lent 4B: Num 21:4-9

LPC, 3/22/09

Once we had a horrible and stubborn smell in our kitchen. I disinfected all the surfaces and still the odor persisted. At length the culprit was discovered in the drawer below the oven, where we were in the habit of storing potatoes and onions. Some potatoes and/or onions (at this point it was hard to tell which) had rotted to the point of liquefaction. It was not enough to remove the rotten vegetables. The drawer had to be thoroughly scrubbed. The problem was not solved by cleaning the surface. We had to open the dark places and bring them to light, so they could be cleansed and sweetened.

This, in a nutshell, is the point of Lent: to search out the dark, smelly bits of our souls and bring them to light so they can be cleansed and sweetened. Surface cleaning may keep our souls superficially presentable at most times, but Lent is a time to dig into the dark places.

I tell this story at this time for our mutual edification in case the Lenten message has gotten somehow cloudy since Ash Wednesday. Lent may be half over, but even if we haven't done anything about it yet, we still have time to get it right.

To help us get back on track if our Lent has gotten sidetracked, we have this strange little story from the Book of Numbers in our readings today.

The context of this story is sometime well-advanced during the forty years the people of Israel spent in the Wilderness between being liberated from slavery in Egypt and making it to the Promised Land.

Despite their salvation at the hands of God, the people of Israel have not been especially cooperative with God. They have been markedly uncooperative. They complain ceaselessly about the miraculous but monotonous food that God has supplied. The Bible tells us that God sends poisonous snakes among them, and many people die of snakebite.

Our modern ears find it problematic that God would deliberately send a fatal plague among God's people. It may help to know that the ancient people who wrote down this story and the other oldest stories of the Bible found it inconceivable that anything should happen without being a direct and intentional act of God. They didn't know about migration patterns and food supplies and other factors that may have caused a drastic increase in the aggressive snake population, so they attributed it to God.

Please also listen to the whole story. This is not so much a story of people deservedly receiving God's punishment as it is a story of people undeservedly receiving God's redemption. The people are eventually saved, but not because they earn it by good behavior. Their behavior in fact has been very bad. Their salvation comes through God's agency alone, not their own efforts or virtue.

What happens next in the story is that, at the people's entreaty, Moses intercedes for the people and is directed to make a bronze serpent and place it on a pole. This Moses does, and the people who gaze upon the image recover from the poison within them.

What the people are required to gaze upon, if they want to recover, is nothing other than their sin. I am indebted to the Rev. Jim Kelly for this insight. The snakes that are killing the people are the people's sin. In order to recover from this killing sin, they must raise the sin to the light, gaze on it and recognize it for what it is, just as they recognize, in the bronze serpent, the image of what is causing them pain and death.

Just like the rotten potatoes and onions in my kitchen drawer, the sin must be brought to light for cleansing and sweetening. This was true for the ancient Hebrews, and it is true for us.

In case I have not been sufficiently clear in previous sermons what I mean by sin, let me be clear now. I am not talking so much about individual acts of sin. I am talking about the sinful impulses that we have not disarmed through dependence on God and habits of virtue. This is sin that hides in the drawers of our souls, inclining us to individual acts of sin. Acts of sin can be atoned for, but unless the underlying sinful impulse is brought to light and cleansed, those acts of sin will continue and spread, like the smell of rotten vegetables.

In other words, I am not talking about sins like cutting off someone in traffic. I am talking about the sins of impatience and selfishness that lead a person to cut someone off in traffic, and sometimes, much, much worse things. These are the sins that need to be brought to light and gazed upon, especially during Lent.

This is not a fun thing to do. It can't have been fun for the Hebrews to gaze on an image of the cause of their suffering. It wasn't fun to clean the malodorous vegetable goo out of my kitchen drawer. It is not fun to face sin. But it is the way to healing.

The Bible tells us that when the distasteful relics of sin are raised up in the light, God will heal them. God will cleanse and sweeten them. This is not through any virtue of our own. We in fact have not been virtuous. That's the point. It doesn't matter. God will save. Sin kills. God saves.

You may have only fine, ripe, wholesome vegetables in the drawers of your soul. But it doesn't hurt to check.