

Sermon for Sunday, March 11, 2018 - "Strange Remedies"

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 11, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

Scriptures for today: Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus, lifted up for all.

When I was a kid, my mom had some strange home remedies. Anytime I'd come in itching with mosquito bites she'd bring out the toothpaste and smear it all over my arms. I got a big ugly wart once and she applied duct tape. Before long car trips, she'd have me drink lemon juice to prevent motion sickness. I was quite suspicious of these remedies. I wanted to go to the store and buy the stuff that said "results guar- anteed" right there on the box. "Can't I just take Dramamine like Stephanie does?" I'd whine. "Why can't you keep calamine lotion around like every other mom?" I'd complain. "I am *your* mom. Trust me," was her only response. I now use all of her strange remedies myself.

Our Old Testament reading today has two very strange remedies in the midst of a very strange story. What's most strange, and very troubling, is that God sends a plague of poisonous serpents upon the people.

Up to this point in their story, God has been incredibly generous to the people: claiming them as God's own people, committing to them with a covenant, bringing them out of slavery, leading them in the wilderness towards the promised land, providing food in the desert. God's tells them again and again, "Do not be afraid. I am your God, trust me, listen to me." But the people just can't get past their fear and anxiety. Instead of trusting, they hoard the food God provides and it rots. They worship idols. They get impatient and irritable - demanding the quick fix and the guaranteed result. They grumble and whine with complaints like we heard today, "there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." (Which one is it- no food or gross food? Can't be both.)

So instead of moving forward into the promised land, God's people get stuck - stuck in a seething pit of anxiety, fear, bitterness and whining. All of this stuff poisons them, draining their life away. Ever felt like that?

God refuses to just watch from afar as they dig deeper into a toxic hole. So, God sends poisonous serpents that bite them and many die. Actually, the Hebrew here doesn't mean poisonous, it means fiery - it is the word seraph. God sends fiery seraph serpents to bite the people. Fiery seraphs also appear to Isaiah when God calls him to be a prophet. Seraphs get his attention. They do the same thing for the people here. They thought their life was bad; no, this is bad. Nothing like the possibility of your death to awaken you to the beauty of your life. Perhaps the fiery, seraph serpents that God sends aren't so much a punishment as they are a wake-up call to the people - a strange remedy to startle them out of their anxiety and bitterness.

Except- Did God really send the serpents, or is that what the people thought in hindsight? Maybe serpents just got their attention and they interpreted it as a message from God? I don't know. And even if serpents were God's doing back then, does God still send things that hurt us? I really don't think so; I just don't think God is the cause of suffering. What I do know is that in my own life, there have been some painful wake-up calls that have broken through my grumbling and self-pity, that have helped me to notice God's presence and God's care. Did God orchestrate those moments to open my eyes? I don't think so. Yet I do believe God used those difficult times for good, that God didn't cause them but was at work in them. These days, our country is experiencing painful wake-up calls around issues of sexual harassment, race, and gun violence - to name a few. I do not believe God is the cause of these things - not at all. Yet I do believe God can use them for good- to get our attention and turn us around. Painful things can be strange remedies.

Whatever the cause, that strange remedy of the serpents works. It gets the people's attention. They recognize how toxic their lives have become, how much they need God. They confess their sin to Moses and ask him to pray to God to remove the serpents.

But God doesn't remove the serpents. Instead, God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent and place it on a pole. Then the people who are bitten can look at the serpent and live.

This sounds like hocus-pocus stuff; it sounds like worshipping an idol. Yet God uses that bronze serpent to heal the people. God doesn't take away the pain. Instead, God provides a way through it, healing in the midst of it.

They look upon a serpent who cannot bite them. As they do, they find that all the serpents no longer have power over them. They don't need to be afraid - another strange remedy that works. It works for them and it actually works for us, too. God asks us to look upon our sin, our fear, our pain, to face it all in order to see that it does not have ultimate power of us - it will not ultimately destroy us.

This is what the cross shows us. Jesus is lifted up on the cross - something that looks to all the world like failure and death. Yet the cross shows us that all that stuff does not have ultimate power over us; rather, God works new life from it all. The One who was lifted up on the cross to die was also lifted to new life.

The strange remedy of the cross means that, personally and collectively, we can face all our fears, our prejudices, our violence. The God who brings life out of death is more powerful than all of that stuff. God is in the midst of it to bring life out of it - now and always.

Let's take a moment for prayer and reflection.

