

## **John 3: 14-21**

**WHAT ARE YOU MOST AFRAID OF? DEPENDING ON THE CONTEXT OF YOUR FRAME OF MIND, THE ANSWER MAY VARY. ACCORING TO A RECENT POLL NAMING THE TOP 10 PHOBIAS, #3 WAS FEAR OF SNAKES! THIS FEAR AFFECTS AROUND 49% OF WOMEN AND 22% OF MEN. IT'S A FEAR THAT HAS BEEN HIGHLIGHTED BY MOVIES LIKE *SNAKES ON A PLANE*, WHOSE VERY PREMISE MAKES ONE'S SKIN CRAWL. AND, OF COURSE, THE CHARACTER INDIANA JONES IS NOTORIOUS FOR HIS FEAR AND DISLIKE OF SNAKES, WHICH SEEM TO SLIP INTO MANY A SCENE IN THE CLASSIC TRILOGY. AND WHILE SOME OF YOU MIGHT NOT BE PARTICULARLY WARY OF THESE COLD-BLOODED CREATURES, MY GUESS IS FEW OF US WANT TO MEET THEM IN UNEXPECTED WAYS.**

**BECAUSE OF THIS RESPONSE, OUR OLD TESTAMENT LESSON FROM NUMBERS READS ALMOST LIKE ANOTHER CHAPTER IN A STORY OF SUSPENSE. THE SETTING IS THE DRY, HOT DESERT, YEARS INTO THE ISRAELITE'S JOURNEY FROM EGYPT TO THE PROMISED LAND. THIS STORY IS THE END OF A SERIES OF MURMURING STORIES WHERE GOD'S PEOPLE WONDER IF GOD IS REALLY LEADING THEM AT ALL. THEY ARE TIRED AND CRANKY, AND BECOME IMPATIENT ABOUT THEIR DESTINATION. THEIR JOURNEY HAS SEEMED TO CAUSE THEM NOTHING BUT TROUBLE, WITH ONE THING AFTER ANOTHER THAT MAKES THINGS DIFFICULT. THE DEEPER THEY GET INTO THE WILDERNESS, IT SEEMS, THE MORE ROMANTICIZED MEMORY THEY HAVE OF THEIR LIVES AS SLAVES IN EGYPT. DISSENSION HAS GROWN IN THE RANKS. THE "LETS GO BACK TO EGYPT" COMMITTEE GETS WOUND UP. THEY HAVE LONGED FOR THE "GOOD OLE DAYS" WHEN THEY AT LEAST HAD FOOD TO EAT, LIKE CUCUMBERS, FISH, MELON, LEEKS, ONIONS AND GARLIC. SLAVERY IN EGYPT WAS BAD, BUT IT WAS BETTER THAN FREEDOM. WITH FREEDOM COMES TOO MANY CHOICES, THEY CRY. A PASTOR WRITES THAT EVERY CHURCH HAS A "LETS GO BACK TO EGYPT COMMITTEE", A GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO ARE OPPOSED TO ANY SORT OF CHANGE AND ALWAYS WANT TO GO BACK TO THE WAY THINGS USED TO BE.**

**EVENTUALLY GOD HAS ENOUGH OF THEIR WHINING AND SENDS A PACK OF POISONOUS SERPENTS INTO THEIR MIDST. THE DRAMA TURNS WHEN MOSES CRAFTS A POISONOUS SERPENT MADE OF BRONZE AND LIFTS IT HIGH ON A POLE. ALL THE ISRAELITES WHO HAD DIED WERE GIVEN NEW LIFE, AND EVERY TIME AN ISRAELITE WAS BITTEN BY A SNAKE, ALL HE OR SHE HAD TO DO WAS LOOK TO THE SERPENT AND BE HEALED. ANYONE WHO HAS HAD SURGERY KNOWS SOMETHING ABOUT THE TERROR AND HEALING OF SNAKES ON A POLE. THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION ADOPTED THE IMAGE OF THE ANCIENT GREEK GOD OF HEALING, A SNAKE TWINED ON A STAFF. SOMETIMES, WHEN YOU GO TO THE HOSPITAL, THEY HAVE TO HURT YOU BEFORE THEY CAN HEAL YOU. DANGER FREQUENTLY PAVES THE**

WAY TO NEW LIFE. OFTEN AN IMAGE OF UGLINESS AND DEATH CAN BE THE MEANS TO WHOLENESS. IN THIS WAY, OUR STORY FROM NUMBERS ECHOES THE LARGER STORY OF SALVATION. JESUS' VIOLENT DEATH ON THE CROSS IS THE MOMENT OF GOD'S REDEMPTION AND THE RECONCILIATION BETWEEN GOD AND CREATION.

THE STORY OF MOSES LIFTING UP THE SERPENT IN THE WILDERNESS FORESHADOWS GOOD FRIDAY AND EASTER MORNING. THIS IS PARTICULARLY TRUE WHEN WE HEAR THIS LESSON ALONGSIDE THE GOSPEL FROM JOHN. JOHN TELLS US THAT JUST AS MOSES LIFTED UP THE SERPENT IN THE WILDERNESS, SO THE SON OF MAN BE LIFTED UP. SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF CHRISTIANS, THE IMAGE OF DEATH LIFTED HIGH ON A POLE IS NOT THAT OF A SERPENT, BUT THAT OF GOD IN CHRIST LIFTED HIGH ON THE CROSS.

THE SCENE IS SET. TIMES ARE HARD. THE PEOPLE ARE ON EDGE. THEY ARE AT ODDS WITH ONE ANOTHER AND WITH THEIR LEADERS. YOU CAN IMAGINE THE SOUNDTRACK'S CREEPING MUSIC IN THE BACKGROUND, ALERTING US IT'S ABOUT TO GET EVEN WORSE. CUE THE SNAKES.

IF I WAS WATCHING THIS FILM, I WOULD WANT TO FAST FORWARD PAST THIS PART TO GET THROUGH THE SCARY STUFF. I'M GUESSING I'M NOT ALONE. WHETHER IT'S SNAKES OR SOME OTHER FEAR, OUR TENDENCY IS TO GRIT OUR TEETH, HOLD ON TO THE ARMRESTS, AND MAKE IT THROUGH AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE, HOPEFULLY EMERGING ON THE OTHER SIDE WITHOUT TOO MANY SCRATCHES ON US. PERHAPS THIS IS HOW THE HEBREWS STARTED THEIR JOURNEY, IN THOSE HARROWING MOMENTS AS THEY PASSED THROUGH THE WATERS OF THE RED SEA. BUT EVENTUALLY THAT ADRENALINE WEARS OUT, AND AS THEY DISCOVERED THINGS LITERALLY JUMPED UP AND BIT THEM.

UNFORTUNATELY, THIS IS A FAIRLY TRUE REFLECTION OF REAL LIFE. HARDSHIP AND DIFFICULTY SOMETIMES SPRING UP WHEN WE LEAST EXPECT IT. KATE BOWLER, PROFESSOR AT DUKE DIVINITY SCHOOL, IN HER MEMOIR WROTE ABOUT HER JOURNEY AS A 35 YEAR OLD WHO APPEARED TO HAVE EVERYTHING GOING FOR HER...A THRIVING CAREER, MARRIED TO HER HIGH SCHOOL SWEETHEART WITH A NEWBORN SON...ALL JARRED BY AN UNEXPECTED DIAGNOSIS OF STAGE 4 COLON CANCER. IN THE MIDST OF WRESTLING WITH HER OWN MORTALITY, SHE GOES TO TEXAS TO HEAR AN INSPIRATIONAL SPEAKER DURING LENT, WHO CONFESSED SHE DIDN'T LIKE TO DEAL WITH THE HEAVY STUFF, AND WAS AFRAID OF DEATH AND WOULD RATHER YOU NOT TALK ABOUT IT EITHER. BOWLER, UPSET BY THIS, SAID TO A FRIEND, "EVERYONE IS TRYING TO EASTER THE TOUGH STUFF OUT OF MY LENT."

LENT REMINDS US THAT THERE IS A WORLD OF SUFFERING OUT THERE...THIS IS THE SEASON WHEN WE REMEMBER THAT DEATH IS PART OF LIFE AND WE ARE CALLED TO NOTICE IT. WE ARE CALLED TO FACE IT. WE ARE CALLED TO LET THE REALITY OF DEATH RE-PRIORITIZE OUR LIVES. WE MUST REMEMBER THE CROSS COMES BEFORE THE RESURRECTION. SOMETIMES

**SUFFERING IS THE ONLY PATH TO REDEMPTION, AND OFTEN THE ROAD TO HEALING AND LIGHT RUNS STRAIGHT THROUGH DARKNESS AND PAIN.**

**THAT IS WHY WE BEGIN WITH ASHES ON OUR FOREHEADS, HEARING THE LINE FROM GENESIS “REMEMBER YOU ARE DUST, AND TO DUST YOU SHALL RETURN.” OUR LESSON FROM NUMBERS RETURNS US TO THIS ASPECT OF OUR LENTEN JOURNEY. IT REMINDS US THAT WE LIVE IN A WORLD THAT IS DANGEROUS AND OFTEN UNPREDICTABLE. IT GIVES US PERMISSION TO NOT JUST RUSH INTO RESURRECTION, BUT NAME THE “SNAKES” IN OUR OWN WILDERNESSES. THE THINGS THAT STRIKE FEAR IN US. THE THINGS THAT ARE LIKE POISON TO OUR BODIES AND OUR RELATIONSHIPS. THE HEBREW WORD USED TO DESCRIBE SNAKES IS OFTEN TRANSLATED AS “POISONOUS” BUT LITERALLY MEANS “FIERY” OR “BURNING.” THE STORY ASKS US TO CONSIDER THE THINGS THAT SEEM TO BITE US AND LEAVE A STING.**

**LOOKING BACK TO THE ISRAELITES, WE DISCOVER THAT, DESPITE THEIR COMPLAINING AND PERHAPS DOUBTS, THEY TURN TO GOD. THEY BRING THE BROKENNESS OF THEIR EXPERIENCE, INCLUDING THE SNAKES, AND BEG FOR THEM TO BE REMOVED. AND GOD RESPONDS WITH AN ACT OF SOLIDARITY. GOD INSTRUCTS MOSES TO TAKE THE POISONOUS SERPENT, THE ONES WHO HAVE CAUSED THE PEOPLE SUCH PAIN, AND SET IT ON A POLE THAT PEOPLE MIGHT BE HEALED. THIS PASSAGE TELLS US A LOT ABOUT GOD: EVEN IN OUR WORST FAILURES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS, GOD PROVIDES. GOD OFFERS HEALING FOR OUR WOUNDS, RELATIONSHIPS FOR OUR LONELINESS, AND FAITHFULNESS FOR OUR FAITHLESSNESS. GOD DOESN'T REMOVE THE SOURCES OF OUR SUFFERING, BUT GOD MAKES THE JOURNEY WITH US, PROVIDING WHAT WE MOST DEEPLY NEED, IF WE BUT LOOK IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION.**

**THE STAFF OF MOSES PROVIDES THE ISRAELITES WITH A DIRECTION TO LOOK. IT IS MEANT TO BE MORE OF A SIGN AND SEAL OF GOD'S TRANSFORMING POWER OVER ANYTHING, EVEN DEATH.**

**LIKE THE STAFF, THE CROSS PROCLAIMS GOD'S SOLIDARITY WITH A SUFFERING WORLD. TO HEAR THOSE FAMILIAR WORDS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL IN TANDEM WITH THIS REFERENCE LESSON IN NUMBERS ENRICHES ITS MEANING. IT REMINDS US THAT GOD LOVED *THIS* WORLD, THIS MESSED UP, FULL OF SNAKES, SUFFERING WORLD WITH ALL OF ITS SIN AND PAIN. THAT IT WAS TO *THIS* WILDERNESS OF A WORLD THAT GOD SENT HIS ONLY SON, JESUS CHRIST, THAT WE MIGHT LIFT OUR EYES AND SEE LOVE. AND INDEED, OUR LORD EVEN SPENT TIME IN THE LITERAL WILDERNESS, 40 DAYS IN FACT. WHICH MEANS THAT EVEN IF WE ARE IN THE MIDST OF A PIT OF SNAKES, OR WORSE, FIND OURSELVES BITTEN, WE KNOW THAT WE DO NOT HAVE TO TRAVEL THIS DESERT ROAD ALONE. FOR WE TRAVEL WITH ONE WHO HAS BEEN LIFTED UP AND WHO INDEED OVERCOMES ALL EVIL. WHEN JESUS SAYS**

**“GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD,” JESAME GOD WHO IS LIFTED HIGH ON THE CROSS IN REDEEMING LOVE. LENT ALWAYS JOURNEYS THROUGH GOOD FRIDAY AND ALL OF US WILL EVENTUALLY BEAR THE SADNESS OF THE CROSS. WE ARE DEEP INTO LENT, THAT 40 DAY JOURNEY INTO THE DESERT WILDERNESS OF OUR BROKENNESS AND THE BARRENNESS OF OUR SOULS. THE ANSWER TO OUR WANDERING IN THE WILDERNESS OF OUR SIN IS WHEN THE SON OF MAN IS LIFTED HIGH ON THE CROSS, THE LOVE OF GOD GIVEN FOR THE WORLD. LET US LIFT UP OUR EYES TO THE CROSS, AND TRUST IN THE LIGHT OF GOD’S REDEEMING GRACE.**