

March 15, 2015 - Fourth of Lent

Numbers 21: 4-9

Snakes in the Grass

We are in the middle of the season of Lent, which also means for Montreal, the season of potholes. It is a time of collective complaint against the principalities and powers of faulty road construction and questionable repair. On Monday Vicki and I were out and about in different sections of the city and found that big, deep potholes were well distributed throughout the older parts of the city. In Baie d'Urfe we still don't experience what Montreal potholes are all about.

The questions this year as every year are will the potholes in Montreal reach near biblical proportions? And will our complaining about them make a difference?

We hear of complaining in our Old Testament lesson as well.

In fact, it is the final and most emphatic complaining by the Israelites' during their long sojourn in the wilderness. In this climax of complaining they complain directly against God and indirectly against Moses. They forget what kind of a journey they were on. They are bored with the food and upset about the lack of water.

"If this is a journey with God why aren't we having a banquet instead of this quail and manna stuff every day?

It's so boring."

We might be thinking "If we are on a journey with God, why isn't our church full on Sunday mornings?"

Sometimes we all forget just how fortunate we are to be on a journey with God. So, the Israelites in their cranky negativity draw negativity onto themselves.

Take note here: In Old Testament times of pre-rational thinking, to make their God better and more powerful than the other gods about them, they ascribed everything to God's doing. Our God makes everything happen that happens: Good and bad alike. So God brings poisonous snakes to kill the very people God is trying to rescue and redeem. That just doesn't compute today. Rather we recognize that in a vortex of venomous, self-referencing and self-pity, they draw every fiery serpent, every poisonous snake for miles around, metaphorically speaking or actually. Instead of being on a journey of liberation, they make it a passage through poisonous snakes of one kind or another.

You know what I mean!

When we get so frustrated that life doesn't easily work out, when we get so sanctimonious and self-righteously indignant, we manifest our own personal poison all around us.

When we get like this, we can suck the life out of the room or the situation.

When we get like this, we can poison relationships, and poison the family or community well from which we all must drink. And soon enough, what can go wrong will go wrong! We forget we are on a journey of liberation; a road of rescue from what is biting us.

So God tells Moses to fashion a serpent, put it on a pole and walk ahead of the people. The Israelites are to look up and look ahead.

They are to stop worrying about every rustle to the left and stop getting distracted by every slither to the right. They are to let go and look up to the sign of hope and healing.

Notice, God doesn't get rid of the snakes that the people draw in. Rather, God works out a way to rescue the people from their predicament.

God reminds them that they are on a journey of life and liberation.

God offers hope and healing.

God doesn't remove society's serpents that nip at our heels or the heels of our faith communities these days.

But God does offer us creative opportunities for our journey of life and liberation.

The Application for Today:

Lent is a time of letting go. Letting go of the negativity that bites us and looking forward to the grace that heals us. Amen.

John 3: 14-17

God's Love in Us

As we saw in our Old Testament lesson, even when we are journeying with God, life doesn't always go as planned. Life so often has its hardships. Something is always biting at our heels.

We prudently plan for our retirement and then the worldwide economy wipes out a decade worth of savings. We build a career or help our children do so, and now quality jobs are on the chopping block again. Instead of sitting comfortably many of us may end up scrambling to make ends meet. The kids never quite turn out the way we dream or live as close as we expect. The parenting skills and life choices of our children or our grandchildren mystify us now-a-days. And then there are the people who bother us, and the various governments' agendas that anger us and the long cold winter and non-starting spring that frustrates us. Life rarely goes the way we plan and we seem to be part of the problem much more than we will admit. It's hard to accept our part when something is always biting at our heels.

However, if we keep living in denial, we just insure that life continues to bite us. In our frustration and negativity the snakes are still out to get us.

But as John's gospel reminds us: Amazing as it might appear God loves this serpent infested world of human endeavour. In Jesus, God gives us a helping hand. John casts around for an image of hope and healing and finds it, in the story of the Israelites complaining in the wilderness and beset by poisonous snakes.

"Just as Moses lifted up a bronze serpent in the wilderness so must the Son of man be lifted up... Just as the Israelites were to let go and look up and look ahead, and stop worrying about every rustle to the left and stop getting distracted by every slither to the right, so too the people in John's day are let go of their troubles and look to God's love revealed in the Passion of Jesus. They are to look up to the sign of hope and healing. John says that in our serpent infested world which God absolutely loves, we need to look up to the life-renewing love Jesus reveals. Now the problem with real love is our attachments to all the things we like. Our affections, infatuations and attractions get mixed up all the time with love. "Wouldn't you just

love this?" Or "I'd love to do that." Or "I'd love to be there." However Love is so much more than these fleeting likes, wishes or indulgences.

Love comes to us as a profound invitation to become our best self.

Love makes a strong claim on our life.

Love calls forth deep commitments, profound sharing and endless giving. Real love requires that we let go of anything or everything as the situation requires. That is what Holy week reveals. Jesus' Passion is living love all the way, for real Love always involves some kind of suffering.

You see Jesus has ushered in God's New Day which absolutely loves the serpent infested world of human endeavour. He takes his religious movement to the Holy City. There the authorities will see what he is up to and decide for themselves whether to embrace Jesus, and God's New Day or kill him because it. They will decide whether to be serpents or doves.

With the deep commitment of love Jesus is willing to let go of what he wants, what he would like to see happen. Jesus with an allowing love lets go of ego concerns and allows the situation to play itself out.

He is willing to hand himself over to the free will response of the authorities.

He is willing to love them and suffer them no matter what.

He is so caught up in God's love that he will not cut and run. He will let go of everything; every thing, but he will not let go of God or humanity. He will hold on tight. He will suffer through. That is the transforming power of Love.

God's ever present Love ushers us into lasting life.

When we look to Jesus on our Lenten journey, we recognize not what we like or want but what we need.

As Fr. John Main remarked

"What we need constantly to be deepening is our understanding that Love is an abiding presence among the shifting sands of our life.

And this understanding must be both mature and personal.

We have to understand that Love is the free choice of a conscious being to turn away from self towards the other."

We need real Love, God's Love in our lives and it is already and always there. In cultivating this Love we find wholeness and lasting life, in this life.

We find God's everlasting life welling up within us, in the here and now.

We discover that the serpents in life are no longer the problem.

They simply become an opportunity.

Frustrations and distractions can be exchanged for new beginnings.

And what is biting us is healed for lasting life.

The Application for Today:

Lent is letting go.

Let's let go of all the superficial confusions and distractions and say yes to real Love. Amen.