

**“GOD THE SNAKE HANDLER”**

*Numbers 21:4-9*

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

The Israelites are complaining again. This time they’re writing even more vigorously in the comments section: *God did you bring us out here to kill us? There is no food and there is no water. And we hate this food!* Which is a funny thing to say about food you don’t have. They sound like whiney children, or like one child I overheard a few weeks ago, who said, “Oh, I hate things I don’t like.”

You’d think the Israelites would think twice about complaining at this point. It wasn’t so long ago that they complained about the food. *Why, back in Egypt we could get big grouper po-boys for, like 2 bucks, with leeks and onions and garlic. But now all we have is this miserable Spam!* (Num. 11:5-6). Then, as the story goes, God sends quails, so they could have some meat. But then the quail meat makes them so sick they describe their trouble as a “plague.” For many died.

Sometime later, the Israelites complain again, and God threatens them with annihilation. God tells Moses, “I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them, and I will start over with you to make a new nation, greater and mightier than they” (14:12). And, well, this is just one more event that, combined with all the others, portrays an awfully cruel God.

Then there is the matter of these fiery snakes. *God did you bring us out here to kill us? There’s no food and no water and this food we don’t have is terrible!* So, Numbers tells us, “Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.” What kind of snake handler God is this?

I do note a tone of uncertainty running through all of these accounts, though. Sometimes the text has God’s excruciating judgments in quotes, coming from the very mouth of God. The narrator reports God’s proclamation of judgment as if he’d received it on golden tablets delivered to his door. Yes, see! There is an explanation for this plague. God did it. Says it right here in the book! “Get out of my way, Moses, so that I may consume [the Israelites] in a moment!” (16:45).

But in this serpentine account, the quotes go missing. The narrator simply writes, **Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died** (21:6).

Maybe it’s just me—and I know that it was not my calling in life to write the Book of Numbers—but if I’m recording these events, and I’m going to attribute something as devastating as a snake attack on vulnerable people to the heart and mind and *action* of God, the least I could do is be confident enough in that assertion to quote the LORD. But unlike the other accounts, where the LORD is implicated in the violence, in this story, the LORD is simply said to have sent the snakes.

What gives, Numbers? Did you hear God say, “I am sending the snakes”?

Yes? Then why didn’t you put it in quotes?

“Well, God did all these other painful things to us. So I just figured...”

Don’t you go hemming and hawing on me, Numbers! Did God say God sent the snakes? Or are you unsure about this one?

Or is it the case that terrible things simply happen to people: bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people? And sometimes when you’re walking through harsh and unforgiving landscapes there are also harsh and unforgiving creatures lurking there. Creation and creatures have been turning on each other from the beginning. “He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen. 3:15).

Years ago, there was a private pond where I’d go fishing. Quiet and serene, far from everyone and everything. Dad and I went out there together one day. We weren’t having much luck fishing from the banks, so we hopped in a little johnboat and paddled out into deeper water. Near the drain on one end, there was a post sticking up about seven feet above the water’s surface, with what looked like an old bird house nailed to the top. I paddled over, but got too close and bumped the post with the boat enough that it jolted us a little. And it jolted the wasp’s nest *a lot*. I saw an angry cloud of glossy black explode around us. I froze. But it was too late for Dad, his being much closer to the nest. He dove in and stayed under the water as long as he could. (Just FYI: He’s okay. Only stung twice. Lost his sunglasses. Kept his wallet.)

Exodus tells the story of a God who sends plagues on the wicked Egyptians. But now the Israelites are running into one devastation after another in this wilderness, and, well, it must be that God is doing these things to them because isn’t that what God does? Send down fire. Swallow people into sink holes. Burn people alive. Poison the quail meat. Send snakes. We need explanations for this! So, the author says, *The LORD did it...*

The fictional preacher in the novel, *Gilead*, John Ames, describes the best sermon he ever wrote in a lifetime of preaching. When Spanish influenza swept through Iowa during World War I, the mothers of young men newly drafted—but whose dead bodies were now stacked in piles waiting to be buried—asked their pastor why God would allow this. Ames wrote a sermon about how this plague was a sign from God, that by their deaths they were spared the act of killing. “The Lord was gathering them in before they could go off and commit murder against their brothers.”<sup>1</sup> But then he imagined his congregation, and how he’d be preaching this to people already so sad. So that Saturday night, he dropped the sermon pages in the oven, and preached on the parable of the Lost Sheep instead.

Jesus asks his disciples, “What kind of father, whose child asks for a fish, gives him a snake instead?” (Lk. 11:11).

Religion professor, Kate Bowler, has just written a book entitled, *Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I’ve Loved*, a testimony about the ways she has struggled to interpret her stage 4 cancer diagnosis as a young wife and mother. After writing an article about it in the *New*

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<sup>1</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (Macmillan, 2005) 48.

*York Times*, she receives thousands of emails. She divides the ones trying to explain her disease into 3 categories: Minimizers, Teachers, and Solutions People. The Minimizers' basic message is "Stop complaining and accept the world as it is." One of these emails included a lot of praying hands emoticons. The Teachers focus on her experience as an opportunity for self-improvement. One man writes, "I hope you have a Job experience." The hardest ones come from the Solutions People, who say things like, "Keep smiling, your attitude determines your destiny!" "There is," Bowler says, "a trite cruelty in the logic of the perfectly certain."<sup>2</sup>

One person came by the hospital to tell her, "Everything happens for a reason, you know?" To which Bowler's husband responded, "I'd like to know it."

What is the gospel today? It is, in part, the fact that there are no quotation marks assigning the voice of God to sending these fiery serpents on God's people. This account in Numbers shows a crack in the façade of certainty about our tragedies and their causes.

What is the whole gospel today? Jesus tells, Nicodemus, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." Isn't it a sign of deeper faith not to categorize, not to attempt to control or explain God, but to remain on this way as witnesses to the delights and the horrors and the terrors of this beautiful life?

Mary Magdalene looked upon the serpent and lived. She was one of the very few that came to Golgotha and watched from a distance, as the brood of vipers writhed at the foot of the cross and sank their fangs into his flesh. Mary Magdalene—she was there. And she walked through the dark valley with him. She stood and looked upon this wild fiery, uncontrollable God - lifted up!

Do you know, she was also the very first person to see him raised, and to hear him call her by name. She found herself in a new garden, where there were no serpents striking her heel, but a fiery serpent standing before her, loving her, calling her by name.

And Mary looked upon Him...and she lived.



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<sup>2</sup> Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I've Loved* (Random House, 2018) 116-19.