

Snakes on the Plains

Numbers 21:4-9

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Several years ago now, a Harris Poll was conducted entitled "What We Are Afraid Of," and it discovered that *snakes* top the list. Of the most common fears, 36 percent of all adults surveyed selected from the provided list snakes as their number one fear.

They said they were more afraid of snakes than heights or flying; than mice or spiders; than being trapped alone in an elevator. However, I did notice that they conveniently left "public speaking" off of the list of possible fears.

Ophidiophobia is the clinical term for an abnormal fear of snakes and, according to that Harris Poll, it affects 49 percent of women and 22 percent of men (*The Harris Poll*, Aug. 18, 1999).

Now, I doubt that you ever heard about that Harris Poll – but Hollywood did. Just a few years after that Harris Poll released its findings, Hollywood released a movie starring Samuel L. Jackson called, "Snakes on a Plane."

After all, what's worse than a fear of flying or a fear of being trapped in a tightly enclosed space? How about being trapped in a tightly enclosed space with a nest of vicious snakes while flying 30,000 feet above ground?

Frankly, there is not a lot of subtlety in this film... or much of a plot. In fact, the title – "Snakes on a Plane" – pretty much describes the plot in its entirety. A shipment of snakes gets out and takes over the cabin of a plane. That's kind of it. And some of the reviews are more entertaining than the movie itself. Here are a few of my favorites:

From a customer on *amazon.com*: "If you have a love for great meaningful movies, please hit the back button. And, if you have a love for common sense movies, please hit the back button. But, if you have a love for mediocre B-rated movies, this *might* be an ok movie for you..."

Another customer wasn't as gracious and said: "Don't watch it unless it's free and you have absolutely nothing better to do... that is two hours of my life that I won't get back."

One customer described the movie like this: "My grandmother's worst nightmare has come to life and only one person can stop it: Samuel L. Jackson."

As you might imagine, film critics had a field day with "Snakes on a Plane." My favorite came from one working for Denver Rocky Mountain News. He summed it up well when he called it: "A triumph of high-concept but low-ambition filmmaking."

But despite all of the criticism and snarky sarcasm it has received, the film did surprisingly well at the box office making \$62 million world-wide doing as well as most horror movies. And it maintains a cult following to this day. So, how is it that movie so thinly veiled and on-the-nose as “Snakes on the Plane” could attain such success?

Is it because it features three of our greatest fears — flying, enclosed places, and snakes — and, at the end of the day, we kind of like the momentary thrill of being scared at the movies?

—OR—

Could it be that by putting all three of those very real, very common fears together in one storyline, it actually made them cease to be scary and, instead, just seem *absurd*?

From the vantage point of life here in the 21st century, nearly everything about this passage from Numbers seems absurd.

Cameron Howard says it like this: “It chafes against both our theological sensibilities and our scientific good sense. Surely God does not send poisonous snakes to punish human beings for their missteps? Certainly just looking at a bronze snake does not relieve a medical ailment like a snakebite. Where is the anti-venom? Where is the splint? And where is the God with whom we feel safe and comfortable” (“Fourth Sunday in Lent,” *Working Preacher*, March 15, 2015)?

The title of this book of the Bible, “Numbers,” is the *english* title and it’s based on the fact that book includes accounts of two separate censuses — one in chapter one and the other in chapter 26 — that are both chocked full of... well... numbers. “The tribe of Reuben were 46,500... the tribe of Simeon were 59,300... the tribe of Gad were 45,650...” and so on.

But the ancient Israelites didn’t call this book, “Numbers.” They called it, “In the Wilderness.” It comes from the first verse of the book: “The LORD spoke to Moses *in the wilderness...*” You see, it’s not a book about numbers, really. It’s a book about the experience of feeling lost in the wilderness before arriving at the promised land. It’s a book about people stuck between a promise and its fulfillment.

For nearly forty years they had been wandering in the desert. Forty years of wind blowing dust in their eyes and their mouths. Forty years of chapped lips and cracked heels. Forty years of wandering aimlessly. Forty years of dreaming about that fertile land. Forty years of wondering if you weren’t better off in Egypt...

Instead of a land of milk and honey, the Israelites had gotten a desert. Imagine how long those years must have felt. We didn’t meet in-person regularly for less than a single year, and that felt like an eternity! This wasn’t what they had signed up for. Where was

this fertile land God had promised? This lush, abundant land? Or had God's promise just fallen short?

We live in a culture of *instant* gratification, so waiting is not our strong suit. In fact, when we researched online giving platforms for the church a few years ago, one of the statistics that Pushpay shared with us was that if it takes a "potential giver" longer than 1 minute to make a donation, 85% of givers will abandon that gift altogether. You want to talk about a culture of instant gratification? We can't even make a charitable donation unless we can do *instantly!*

The late actress, Carrie Fisher, summed up our culture perfectly when she said: "In my experience, instant gratification takes too long."

But the book of Numbers is not the story of instant gratification. It's a story about waiting... about longing... about feeling lost along the journey... about wandering in the wilderness.

So, would it shock you to hear that the people started to complain?

In fact, our story is the last of *five* "complaining" stories in the book of Numbers. By this point, the pattern is predictable:

1. The people complain against their leaders.
2. God moves to punish the people for their sedition.
3. Moses intercedes on their behalf — and the journey continues.

In the present case, however, the people complain against *God* as well as Moses — which may be why this is the last mention of their murmuring. Complaining about Moses or Aaron is one thing, but complaining about God is something else altogether.

And, frankly, their complaint sounds like something that could be attributed to Yogi Berra. They say: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food" (Num. 21:5).

In other words: "We don't have any food, and it tastes terrible, too!"

What is wrong with them? Has the desert heat made them hallucinate?

Barbara Brown Taylor says, "They at least hope they're hallucinating when they see poisonous snakes crawling out of the rocks, heading straight for their feet. But no; these snakes are real. When they bite people, those people die, which brings the living abruptly to their senses. They repent of the sin, pleading with Moses to once again intercede for them with God" (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B: Vol. 2, 101).

And if this story isn't strange enough already, God tells Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and to set it on a pole so it can be lifted up above their heads. Now, if this isn't

an idol, I don't know what is. And it's an Egyptian one at that! Didn't Pharaoh wear a headdress with a spitting cobra on it? Isn't this the symbol of the enemy?

And it only gets weirder.

"Everyone who gets bit and looks up at that bronze serpent lifted up on that pole shall live," says God. How is this not magic? Since when does a statue grant life? When the Israelites made a golden calf, God got ticked – but now a bronze snake set on a pole is the answer?

And the thing is, in this story, it's not even the answer that the people asked for. They wanted Moses to get God to "take away the serpents from us" (Num. 21:7). But the serpents don't go away. They don't even stop biting. Instead, God instructs Moses on how to heal the people who are bitten. They are still bitten, but they live if they look up at that bronze snake. Deliverance does not come in the way they want or expect.

So what do we do with this passage of scripture? How does this story even begin speak to our modern world? More importantly, where is the good news in it? Is there any?

If you think about it, the deliverance that God provides is almost as painful as the ailment. The Israelites were asked to look upon the very thing they feared if they wanted to be healed.

Anyone who has ever had surgery knows both the terror and hope of healing that comes with surgery. Sometimes, when you go the hospital, they have to hurt you before they can heal you. Danger paves the way to new life.

In some sense, then, this is a perfect scripture passage for *our* journey through the Lenten season, which is meant to be *our* wandering in the wilderness. And, if we are faithful to it, we might just be brought face-to-face with our fears, too.

So what fear is it that you need to face?

Fred Craddock used to tell the story of a time when he and his wife, Nettie, were on vacation in the Great Smokey Mountains. One day, they were dining in a restaurant near Gatlinburg, TN when an elderly man approached their table and said, "Good evening."

After they exchanged some pleasantries, it came up that Craddock was a minister in the Christian Church.

"I owe a great deal to a minister of the Christian church," said the man as he pulled out a chair and sat down.

He said, 'I grew up in these mountains. My mother was not married, and the whole community knew it. I was what was called an illegitimate child. In those days that was a shame, and I was ashamed. The reproach that fell on her, of course, fell also on me. When I went into town with her, I could see people staring at me, making guesses as to who my father might be. At school the children said ugly things to me, and so I stayed to myself during recess, and I ate my lunch alone.

'In my teens I began to attend a little church back in the mountains called Laurel Springs Christian Church. It had a minister who was both attractive and frightening. He had a chiseled face and a heavy beard and a deep voice. I went to hear him preach. I don't know exactly why, but it did something for me. However, I was afraid that I was not welcome since I was... *illegitimate*... though they had another word for it. So I would go just in time for the sermon, and when it was over I would move out because I was afraid someone would say, "What's a boy like you doing in a church?"

'One Sunday some people queued up in the aisle before I could get out, and I was stopped. Before I could make my way through the group, I felt a hand on my shoulder, a heavy hand. It was that minister. I cut my eyes around and caught a glimpse of his beard and his chin, and I knew who it was. I trembled in fear. He turned his face around so he could see mine and seemed to be staring for a little while. I knew what he was doing. He was going to make a guess as to who my father was.

'A moment later he said, "Well, boy, you're a child of..." and he paused there. And I knew it was coming. I knew I would have my feelings hurt. I knew I would not go back again.

'He said, "You're a child of God. I see a striking resemblance." Then he patted me on the back and said, "Now, you go claim your inheritance." I left the building a different person. In fact, it turned out that was really the beginning of my life'" (*Craddock Stories*, 156-157).

When I ask you what fear you need to face, I don't mean snakes or heights or enclosed spaces or anything that Samuel L. Jackson can save you from.

I mean, what is it that's keeping you enslaved?

What is it that holds you captive with a feeling of shame?

What is it that prevents you from realizing that you are a child of God?

Maybe you've been in the wilderness long enough. Maybe it's time to look at the thing you fear, and trust that God is right there with you, working to make you strong even in your broken places.

Amen.