

What do you make of that Bible reading from Numbers 21? I don't know which way to go to be baffled. You have the shocking thing of the people grumbling and God sending snakes! That's not the kind of thing we like to think of from our loving and forgiving God. Then there's the ridiculous things the people say: "There is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Huh? No food and we detest this miserable food?

In a very scholarly fashion, theologian Cameron Howard writes:
"Nearly everything about this text feels far removed from twenty-first-century life. 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 assuage a medical ailment like snakebite. Where is the anti-venom? Where is the splint? And where is the God with whom we feel safe and comfortable?" (Cameron B.R. Howard, Working Preacher).

Yes, if we take this text seriously it leaves us unnerved. But I am glad we have it as a reading for today.

Let me make an assumption - most of you do not read and study the Bible on a daily basis, if at all. For many the only Bible reading they experience is what is read in church on a Sunday morning. Those readings are what is called the Revised

Common Lectionary, and most American Christians who go to church today hear them - Roman Catholics and most protestant churches use the same ones. On one hand, that's great. No matter what church we go to we experience unity in Bible readings. But I have a complaint with the Revised Common Lectionary. It tends to choose only those passages that present God as nice and sweet. Rarely are the more difficult texts chosen. And if all you ever experience of the Bible is what is read on Sunday then you are left with a very incomplete picture of the Bible; and thus a very incomplete picture of God.

The truth is that the Bible is a huge, highly complex, and very contradictory collection of writings. There's hardly anything the Bible says in one place that it doesn't contradict someplace else. Sometimes I hear preachers on the radio and I disagree with them completely, but I cannot deny that they are basing their thoughts on the Bible.

My suggestion for Biblical study is to have familiarity with the whole thing. Recognize and admit that there are lots of contradictions; and if you can explore those contradictions with courage you discover the real power of the Bible's truth - how deeply it connects with the complexities and contradictions that you find within yourself. Because all of us are

sophisticated and complex beings. No simple writing can capture all of who we are. Let's not expect any simple writing to reveal all of who God is.

Unfortunately I believe many people's limited reading of the Bible basically domesticates God into a house pet that is sweet and cuddly; a faithful dog who is always happy to see you when you get home. However, God is not to be tamed!

So, back to the point. In Numbers we have a reading from the time when the people of Israel are traveling through the wilderness led by Moses. You'll remember they were in slavery to the Egyptians but God sends Moses to free them. After numerous plagues and miracles the Egyptians let them go free. But it isn't a quick and easy journey to the Promised Land. The Israelites start acting all too much like teenagers who are never satisfied. They grumble. They complain. Nothing's ever good enough. They want food. God gives them food. Then the food isn't good enough. They are in need of something. They forget that God always supplies, and they panic and want to return to slavery.

The whole time God is providing for them they do nothing but grumble. We might be offended by their lack of

appreciation, but let's applaud their honesty with God. How often when you pray do you think you can only pray for righteous things? How often do you really want something terrible to happen to your enemy or someone you don't like, but you don't think such things are appropriate to pray and so you don't. Sort of like when I go into the barber shop and it's full of guys talking the way guys do. Then someone finds out I'm a pastor and all the conversation suddenly prim and proper. What hogwash! Do you think God doesn't know what you really desire? Do you think God can't see deep inside your thoughts? God can. God does.

Someone cuts you off in traffic and you have that momentary urge to ram into them... yeah, God sees that. When you're talking about someone you don't like and you feel that little nudge to enhance certain details and leave out others so you can make him look bad... yeah, God sees that.

The Israelites were being childish and selfish, yes. But they were being honest with God.

Numbers tells us that God sent poisonous serpents which bit the people. Read carefully and notice that the Bible doesn't actually say why God send the serpents. It just says God send

them. The people presume it was because of their complaining but God never actually says. Still, many people die from the snake bites. That thought from this mysterious text might be the hardest of all to swallow.

Why are we so uncomfortable with God sending something that causes many to die? Why is death so bad? If God gave life why is it so offensive for God to take it away?

Answer: because we lay claim to the life God has created in us as if it is our own property. We think life on this earth is ours. However, St. Paul had the right attitude: "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer." (Philippians 1:21-22)

I think the biggest reason why texts like this Numbers text bother us, and why we fight against death so much is because in our minds we have taken (or maybe stolen) ownership of the life God has given us.

Did you give yourself life? No. Biologically it was your mother who gave birth to you. And theologically it is God who

created you. If God creates, then who are we to claim ownership?

Ultimately death reminds us that we never had control. Birth - life - death... it's all God's. We're deluding ourselves if we think otherwise.

There should be nothing offensive about God taking away the life that God has given.

When the people cry to God for help notice that God does not take the snakes away. Instead, God gives a faith-filled way to survive the bites.

God never promised to make the life he created in you easy. God gives a faith-filled way to live it.

I'm going to let the final word on this matter come not from my own thoughts, but the scripture. We'll read our second reading for today. It is from a translation of the Bible called *The Message* and it was done by Eugene Peterson. It's a paraphrase into current English. While it isn't a scholarly work it makes a lot of confusing Bible passages easily accessible.

(Second Reading)