

I hope no one here has a phobia about snakes or lizards—because we sure have a lot of them in today’s Scripture lessons, and even on the front of the bulletin! I’m not fond of snakes myself. They are scary, and can be very dangerous.

In one of the “Anne of Green Gables: stories, there is an episode where Anne is teaching school, and one little girl faints at the sight of a snake. Later, as Anne carries her out of the room, the girl revives and says, “I’m sorry, Miss Shirley. I’m not very good with reptiles.” “Neither am I,” replies Anne, grimly. I can identify with that—how about you?

Well, this story in the book of Numbers is about snakes. It may not be familiar to us, but it certainly was to Jesus. Jesus knew the Bible, through and through. Of course, he did!

For the rest of us though, let’s go over it a bit. The story is about the Israelites. They had escaped from slavery in Egypt. They had gone through the Red Sea on dry land, when Moses had parted it.

They were being fed miraculously with manna, bread from heaven; quails, for meat; and water, when Moses would strike a rock with his staff.

These people had directly and personally experienced many miracles. So, there is absolutely no excuse for what they did in this story: They “spoke against God and against Moses.”

That strikes me as so awful, so spoiled, so ungrateful. To cite one Methodist authority (on the computer), all this “negativity, bitterness, and complaining” had created a “culture of complaint.”

So, at this point, God punished them, sending snakes, poisonous snakes to their campground. Actually, some of the Bible scholars believe that what these creatures were was snakes with wings, that appeared as flames, like little vicious dragons, maybe.

We can’t tell, for certain, at this point. What we can tell is that the people of Israel had brought this trouble on themselves.

And, what’s even worse, is that human nature has not changed a bit. We bring on a great many of our own problems, including physical ailments, even life-threatening ones.

Last weekend at the Women of Faith conference, there was quite a bit said there about the troubles many people bring on themselves through over-eating. Two of the featured women there, the singer Mandisa, from “American Idol,” and Lisa Whelchel,

from the old TV show “The Facts of Life” had faced great difficulties in their careers because of the weight gain brought on by over-eating. And as we all know there are more serious problems there than one’s appearance on television. Most of us don’t have that concern, personally. There are real physical dangers, like high blood pressure, heart conditions, risk of stroke and diabetes. And these are ailments we bring on ourselves.

Over-eating is not the only thing. Drinking too much brings on alcoholism. Smoking causes lung cancer. Using illegal drugs can cause drug-addiction and AIDS. All of these very often have deathly consequences.

Isn’t this a cheery sermon? Sorry. But it is true, we bring on a lot of our own problems.

For the Israelites, it took death by poisonous snake bites to make them face themselves, and appeal to Moses” “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take the serpents away from us.” As Michael E. Williams put it they had been “Whining about death” and now “they learned a lesson about real death.”

Here, things get a little tricky. The Lord did not just “take the serpents away.” That would not have taught these folks much or made a lasting impression. If God had simply removed the snakes, within a week the people would have found something else to complain about; that’s just our rotten human nature.

The bronze snake which Moses made was “a test, a summons to obedience . . . a reminder of how precarious life is without devotion to God.” (Michael E. Williams) Or to put it in medical and psychological terms, the people had to participate in their own cure. That’s only fair, only sensible.

And it’s the same for us—we have to correct our own unhealthy habits, cooperate with the treatment, take the medicine, something! Our doctors and nurses don’t make us well, we have to at least cooperate.

Through all this, the Israelites were healed of the deadly snake bites. They were also healed of the deadly “culture of complaint.” That was transformed into “a culture of trust in God.” (Michael E. Williams)

They faced themselves, their sins and shortcomings and remembered all the grace and miracles which God had had for them. Their trust in God was renewed.

This is the Bible story Jesus remembered and referred to, as he spoke to Nicodemus in the Scripture which we read from the Gospel of John.

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent (the bronze one) in the wilderness, so must (Jesus) the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

When Jesus was lifted up, that is put on the cross, human beings would have to look up at him, face their own sins, and believe.

Then we get to John 3:16, one of the most famous and well-loved verses in the Bible. Maybe you have it memorized. Say it along with me if you like:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish but have everlasting life.”

This is a famous verse. Last year, in fact, we did a Bible study on it, using the Max Lucado book called “3:16, The Numbers of Hope.”

So, you may think there is not much more to be said about this. There is, though.

It turns out there is actually a better translation of two words in the verse—instead of “believe in” , try “believe into.” Those two little letters make a big difference in how to understand this Bible verse.

Now, I am not claiming to have made this discovery about Jesus’ words. Some expert did. But it is really neat. Here goes.

“Believe into” is a critical term in John’s gospel. This phrase is often translated “believe in.” That has led many interpreters over the centuries to read this text as if it were saying “Whoever [agrees] to the idea that Jesus is the Son of God who died for our sins and rose the third day” will instantly receive eternal life into their “celestial account” as it were. (From United Methodist Worship Page, on Internet. Brackets indicate my paraphrasing.)

Now, this may sound off, or controversial, and I don’t mean to be disrespectful to anyone’s favorite verse, but it makes sense to me. Let’s keep going.

“But the Greek [translation] does not allow that interpretation. The Greek does not say “believe in” [meaning mostly intellectual agreement] but rather “believe into”[meaning handing oneself over entirely to someone.] . . . [“Believe in” allows for a view of salvation by faith alone that requires not even the slightest effort to follow Jesus. [Believe into is still] an exercise of faith, but it is far more. It is not just intellectual [agreement. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I believe] but radical trust and submission to Jesus as Lord.

So . . . Eternal life is thus not a ‘thing’ we get when we [agree] to the right theology . . . [Eternal life is] the reality in which we live as we follow [Jesus] the one who is Way, Truth, and Life. [We are called] to something more, to life in and through following Jesus, which we can do because of God’s great love for us.

That love is revealed on the cross . . . but not only there. That love is revealed as profoundly and even primarily in the life of Jesus—his [preaching and teaching of God], mercy through healing . . . Jesus call us to participate in this life by following Jesus.

One more quote, and maybe I can make this clearer, without hurting anyone's feelings, hopefully:

“For too long, fairly or not, John 3:16 has been associated with escapism, with ‘fire insurance’. . . believe [this] and get your ‘get out of hell free’ card. . . Today is an opportunity to reclaim it for what it is—a generous, mercy-filled, and serious call to repentance and discipleship to Jesus.”

How we live and how we believe.

That card thing may sound disrespectful, but I think the idea is important. Because it is human nature so often to try to make deals with God.

God is deeper than that, our Christian faith is meant to be deeper than that. God is not a deal-maker. God is God, Jesus' heavenly father, with so many blessings for us, so much grace. Let's not reduce it to “Yeah, yeah, yeah, I believe already.” Does that make sense?

So, how about that. We believe in Jesus, and better yet we believe into Jesus. We become, more and more, with God's help, the kind of Christians who commit our bodies, our souls, our thoughts, our hearts, and our attitudes to Jesus—to his teachings, his words, his life, and death and resurrection. We get the blessings of Christianity on both sides of the grave.

Like the Israelites, we look up, to the cross in our case, and we see ourselves and our shortcomings, and we see who is going to transform all that. Not a bronze snake, but Jesus, God's Son.

Amen.

(by Rev. Sally J. DeMasters)