

Message for March 22, 2009

“It’s the Pits”

When I was a little girl, my family and I took a trip each summer to Lake Michigan – a family friend made a tiny cottage near the lake available to us, and for two weeks we enjoyed the water, the sun and a very relaxed lifestyle full of sandy beds, food and underwear. Being at Lake Michigan was wonderful – the ride from our home in northeastern Illinois, however, was NOT. These trips took place when I was around 5 or 6 – my little brother was 3 or 4, and my older sister was 10 or so. Three kids circa 1960, crammed in the back of a 53 Chevy, did NOT make for a fun ride, especially when the trip meant we had to: 1) play quietly so we wouldn’t distract my father, the driver, 2) eat neatly so we wouldn’t trash the one car we owned (and we had to eat homemade sandwiches – no Macdonald’s for us!) and 3) be nice to each other. “Nice” was only as good as the first fifty miles – after that, my mother spent a considerable portion of the 300 mile trip telling us to behave. We were good kids, but this was THEN – no air conditioning to ward off hot Illinois summer humidity, no I-pods to block out obnoxious burp sounds from my brother, no DVD player mounted on the car ceiling to watch a movie and pass the time.

We were trapped in a hot metal box on four rubber tires, moving along at about 50 mph, with the cool waters of the lake glimmering like a mirage “out there.” As you probably have guessed, the whiny, high-pitched “Are we there yet?” became a sort of mantra not long after we got on the road...and my dad, bless him, did the best he could to keep his cool during these excursions. He didn’t always succeed, (and it was usually my brother who was on the receiving end of a swat across the bottom), but once we arrived, things were more normal and we fell back into family routines. It was tortuous getting there, but worth the trip.

I share this little family vignette with you because it popped into my mind when I read today’s Old Testament passage. For some reason, this reading reminded me of my father and those family trips. In a vague memory of the Moses stories from Sunday school as a kid, I imagined Poor Old Moses dragging a bunch of Jews around the wilderness for 40 years, trying to get everyone to cooperate, trying to do God’s will, listening to all the complaining and whining, whipping out a miracle here and there to show he had God on his side, and doing his best to make everyone happy. In my young mind, I saw men with long hair wearing dresses, and lots of animals

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wandering around free – and I remember wondering where everyone went to the bathroom or how they could even eat without a fridge to hold the food. I think I did feel a sense of their desperation as a people, because I figured people wouldn't put themselves through such torture if they didn't have to – but, not much of the Exodus of the Jews sounded like anything I would have liked to do when I was 5 or 6 years old.

Now I've learned not to trust those childhood memories, because as we all know, when you're sitting in Sunday school, you don't always listen as carefully as you should...too many distractions! And, since much of what is taught to children in Sunday school is simplified so they get the main idea, I knew figured there's probably more to the story that I should become familiar with once again.

So, I went digging. I can't imagine how Bible scholars in generations before me did without the Internet as a research tool – all I had to do was Google, "Moses" and 37,500,000 hits showed up in .09 seconds! The trick is to be selective about which references might be most reliable – but I managed to find several good, basic resources on Moses and on the other star of today's Old Testament reading – the snake. Surprisingly, there's a lot more their connection and to this little piece of Exodus history than appears to us at first.

Let's look at Moses. Did you know that Moses lived to be 120 years old, and after all he went through, he NEVER even set foot on that Promised Land? Moses, who was called *Moshe Rabbeinu* in Hebrew (meaning, Moses our Teacher), not only is a very important person to the Jews and Christians, but also to people of many faiths, including Baha'l', Rastafari, Chrislam, and Islam among others. And Moses' life story reads like a Shakespearean play.

First of all, we know that he was saved from being killed as a tiny baby by being tossed into the Nile River in a reed basket and plucked out of said river by Pharaoh's daughter, and his real mother (who became a handmaiden for Pharaoh's daughter) raised him in the Egyptian court. Years later, as a young man, he killed an Egyptian while trying to help a Hebrew who was getting assaulted; he almost got away with it, but someone snitched and so he had to make a run for it across the Red Sea to Midian. He spent 40 years there as a shepherd before God appeared before him as a burning bush to give him the news that he'd been chosen to be God's right hand man who would gather the Jews and (with the help of his big brother Aaron who was a sharp

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talker), convince Pharaoh to release the Jews, move them from Egypt, and escort them safely to their new home in Canaan.

To convince anyone who didn't believe Moses had God on his side, God gave him a special rod which could magically be turned into a serpent - he learned to bring about or take away leprosy on his own body – and he could make river water turn into blood if necessary.

By the time Moses finally got around to getting the Jews out of Egypt, they'd been slaves for too many years, and Egypt had been through ten horrible plagues including locusts, frogs, gnats and flies, boils on the skin, hail and thunder, total darkness and finally the slaying of Egyptian first-born sons. These plagues were sent courtesy of God as a reminder to Pharaoh of just who was in charge here. Well, Pharaoh had had enough of the Jews and their God by now, and he eventually gave Moses the high-sign to pack everyone up and get out of Dodge. Just when Moses and the people think things are looking up, three days later Pharaoh changes his mind and sends his great army to destroy the Jews. Anyone who has seen "The Ten Commandments" will know this next part of the story, which involves an amazing scene where the waters of the Red Sea part and all the Pharaoh's men and chariots are wiped out by the crashing of the waves as Moses commands the sea to close up again just as the last Jew crosses over. It must have been quite a site, and definite proof to the Jews that God loved them and wanted them to safely get to Canaan.

In the interest of time, I'll just say for now that right after these famous, visually astounding events occurred, came forty really boring years for the Jews and Moses, and this is where we return to what reminded me of my family trip to Michigan. For as I continued my review of the Exodus story, I noted that there were at least 10 different incidences where the Jews certainly appeared to be less than cooperative children on the journey. In spite of the hope of freedom, all they could concentrate on was what was wrong with the situation.

Let me list some of these issues for you...they didn't like the water or there wasn't any water and they wanted to return to Egypt, so Moses gave them water (that rod-turned-to-water trick was a life saver). They didn't like the food or there wasn't any food and they wanted to return to Egypt, so God provided fluffy, white manna from the sky. There was so much bickering between them, a group of Judges had to be created so that Moses could get relief from constantly solving their problems. They grumbled that Moses and Aaron were holding themselves above the rest of the

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people, so there had to be a face-off between tribes. And they believed they had to have an idol of some kind to represent what they thought was God, so they gathered all their gold, melted it down and made a Golden Calf to worship. Add to this a couple of territorial wars along the way and a plague or two, and you have 40 miserable years together – one long, hard trip.

By this time, they were out of control – and new rules and laws had to be established to rein them back into being the good people Moses knew they should be. So when we catch up with Moses and the Jews in our reading for today, I'd say he'd had enough of the whole thing, and so had God. After their sinful disbelief, and more whining and complaining (are we there yet??), God sends snakes to bite the Jews and kill some of them. Now things are really getting bad – the journey is taking an ugly turn – and the God of Salvation has become a vengeful, spiteful God, right? Maybe not.

Before we go one step further, let's consider the snakes in a more theological light...we'll come back to the story.

Think back through your own Sunday School days to learning about the Creation story and the Garden of Eden; in Chapter 1 of Genesis, God creates the great serpents and every living creature...and we hear about a cosmic God, in control of the universes and all of Creation.

In Chapter 2 of Genesis, God creates man and woman, who fall from grace because of what? Because of a snake! I don't think it's an accident that Adam and Eve find themselves naked and ashamed after disobeying their Maker. They can't do it alone and to whom do they turn when the going gets tough? To God – by God's design.

Remember how God gave Moses that rod which could turn to a serpent? Why? To convince the Jews and Pharaoh himself that God was in power and Moses was his chosen representative. Throughout the Bible, snakes and serpents appear in peoples' lives to stir things up just enough that they eventually remember the Ultimate Source of love and power – Yaweh, Abba, God, Dad - that being who has to turn around every once in a while and remind everyone that, "We're almost there. Now sit still and behave!"

So, let's go back to the Jews and snake bites. Everyone's tired and on the edge; they've been through so much, and still haven't seen the morning sun shine on their Promised Land. This life in

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the desert? It's the pits! Like kids in the back seat trapped on a five-hour drive, the Jews are behaving like unappreciative brats and God decides to act...maybe not in the fairest way or the most loving way, but we find out just a little later that in fact, God is still a forgiving God – and at the urging of Moses, God allows for healing to happen and lessons to be learned through the creation and implementation of a bronze serpent, mounted on a post for all to see. Now, this is one amazing example of irony, God's way.

From the Ten Commandments just received by these most unhappy people, we know that there aren't supposed to be graven images placed before God, but Moses has most certainly been told to create one, which he does...and it's of the very thing the people have been tormented by. A snake. Anyone who can see the bronze serpent will be safe from the live snakes.

The message? **God's in control, and we shouldn't forget it.** According to a great little resource I found online called, "My Jewish Learning.com," it's even possible that **"The Jews were not freed from Egypt simply to restore their human rights. Rather, they were liberated with the purpose of fulfilling God's word – to enter into a close relationship or covenant, with God."**

The journey may be uncomfortable and we might annoy one another, but if we remember who's in control and stay focused, we'll make it, because we're supposed to make it. In this church, in our country, we have so many concerns and things we could complain about – it's easy to get caught up with others in a wave of dissatisfaction and jump onto the bandwagon of listing what isn't working in our lives.

But perhaps, just like the Jews wandering about the desert, we **need** to be reminded once in a while that we haven't been forgotten – and be thankful God really only listens a little when we grumble, and doesn't take our words as seriously as we sometimes take them.

The UCC Lectionary adds this comment about our Old Testament reading and how we can view the story of the Exodus when we try to put it into perspective for us today, for our own time. It says,

"Keeping one's heart and mind trained on the gifts of God, even in a bronze replica of what has brought us pain, and living our lives in trust and humble obedience, are a path through any wilderness that lies before us, in any age and any place. This is Lent, and the themes of sin,

*repentance, and self-examination are certainly in the foreground of our attention. **How and when do we recognize the consequences of our sins, the effects that our sins have on others, near to us or far away?** What wilderness lies before or behind us, and **how has God's presence led us, and comforted us, along the way?** God commands Moses to put the bronze serpent "on a pole." In what ways have we needed to "look up" from our sins or brokenness toward a higher goal, a higher value, a higher vision? In what ways does this remind us of looking up, at the cross, a sign of the consequences of sin, but also of God's triumph?"*

We don't have Moses to take us to the Promised Land, but we do have the presence of a Constant God who allows us to bumble our way through the trip through the desert of life, falling into pits, making bad choices, and shutting our hearts to obvious grace-filled Love – because God knows **we need to need it**. Our Journey through Lent is moving us closer to the joy of Easter and proof through the death and resurrection of Jesus that God loves us much more than we deserve.

So take the water, my Brothers and Sisters - take the Manna - take the Love, and buckle that seat belt for the Ride of your life. God's driving – and we have a long way to go.

Amen.