

-When I was about 5-6 years of age, I was felt I was great at helping my dad with yard projects. I loved to help him seed grass, or rake leaves, move trees, whatever the task required. Our house and backyard butted up against a wooded hill and we had this large retaining wall as part of it. On this retaining wall, we had several juniper bushes that “cascaded” down the front side. They add some greenery, of course, to the wall but they also added a nice little place for bees and wasps to build a nest. Every once in a while, there would be a pretty sizable wasp community in these junipers that my parents, being good parents, didn’t exactly want my brother and I playing with in our backyard adventures. Sure enough another nest appeared and my dad was keen on spraying it. I insisted I wanted to help him because I was his number-one yard man. Well, this was a job that understandably, I was not hired for but I was allowed to watch at a distance. So, my dad sprayed the bush with the next in it as I looked on. Well, as you might imagine, the wasps didn’t really like the spray that my dad was using and were pretty vocal about it, coming out aggressively. I feel sorry for my dad at this point, because as many of you know, he’s a thorough planner and a numbers guy. He goes through exactly what he’s going to do in his brain a thousand times before he does it. So, you can probably join me in feeling sorry for him as he was quickly running away from the angry wasps with everything going to plan so far, except in his turning to look at me he realizes that the wasps weren’t chasing him, but me who was standing just a bit too close. As a soon-to-be father myself right now, I can only imagine the language that went through his mind at that point, language I probably could not repeat from the pulpit here this morning. Anyways, my memory of this experience is a little bit fuzzy, but what I do recall is my dad running toward me at full speed, throwing me into his arms and running into the house. As soon as we got into the house, I remember sharp pain coming from my back, stomach, and legs where the wasps had gotten into my clothes and were stinging me repeatedly. Of course my mom and dad immediately stripped this screaming boy down to his bare skin to get the wasps out. Luckily, it turns out I was not and am not allergic to bee/wasp stings, at least at that point in my life.

-I have had this story in my mind throughout this week when wrestling with both our Old Testament and New Testament stories this morning. These scripture passages are intimately linked: you can’t really understand what Jesus is talking about without knowing the story from Numbers. Since this story from Numbers is incredibly obscure and bizarre and definitely NOT taught in Sunday School, I think it’s important to refresh ourselves of it. You see, you have the book of Numbers, which actually follows the story of Moses and the Israelites from Exodus (skip over Deuteronomy). You see, we tend to forget where the book of Exodus stops: the vision of the promised land that the Israelites are not at yet. There is this little thing, remember, that they wander through the desert for 40 years. Well, Numbers picks up and tells the story of the Israelites wandering. There is a reason why the book of Numbers isn’t on your top 5 best sellers

list of the bible, because in the book of Numbers Moses and the Israelites are pretty cranky. If you want to see infighting, political tumult, and just plain complaining, check out the book of Numbers, that's the book for you. So this is where this challenging story of the Israelites complaining about food and water, God sending serpents to bite (and even kill people), and Moses holding up a pole with a snake on it to heal them, comes from.

-I'll just put it out there, ya know, if I were wandering in the hot desert without steady water or food I would probably be one of the top complainers. Which is why it's even more disturbing in God sending snakes to bite people. What does this say about the nature of God? A God who sends snakes to bite and kill people? That's confounding to me, really. I don't really have any good answers. We could debate all day on where, when, how, why God did this action as the text says, but I think that would be missing the point. I don't think this story is trying to lay out a detailed theological case for God sending snakes, but instead trying to ask the question: where do you look when times get hard?

-Like I said, I don't remember a lot about the stinging wasps, but one of the things I do remember (other than my dad frantically running me into the house) was seeing my mom quickly taking my clothes off but also helping to calm me down: "your going to be OK," she said time and time again. Even as a five year old, I remember I could feel that love and genuine presence even amid the pain of the bee stings.

-I think we get into a lot of trouble sometimes when we run across the word "eternal life" in our scripture passages. We even had some discussion about this last week in bible study when we asked the question: what is eternal life? What is Jesus talking about when he says famously: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."? I think we like to think of eternal life as a timeline. Jesus came, and if I declare him my Lord and Savior, then I can get a one-way ticket to Heaven after this life. Simple right?

-What is so important to this verse, and I would argue to the entire theology of the Gospel of John, is this: "eche zoween aionion". This translates as may "have/hold eternal life." Notice, all you Greek nerds out there, this is NOT in the future tense. It does not say "you WILL have/hold eternal life", but "for God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have/hold eternal life right now." Eternal life starts right here and now, not some place called Heaven.

- Did eternal life happen for these Israelites, starving in the desert, being bitten by snakes? Maybe it depends on where they looked. I know for me personally, I experienced eternal life in that moment of great pain with the bees. That eternal life was given to me by seeing my mom. Even 25 years later, I am truly grateful for that.

-Who do you see when the time gets tough? How does eternal life start with you?

-One of the things that I find interesting about this story from Numbers is if you look closely at what it says when God sends the snakes. It actually doesn't say, "in punishment for complaining God sends the snakes." You know the Old Testament is FULL of people yelling, chastising, spitting, and arguing with God (just look at the Psalms) and God doesn't punish for that. Now maybe God is punishing in some way, but all we have is the text which only says: "then the Lord sent poisonous serpents".

-I think this is important because notice what God doesn't do at the end of this story: take away the snakes. The snakes, we presume because the text doesn't say otherwise, are still there, possibly even still biting people we don't know.

- Dr. Cameron Howard, associate professor at Luther Seminary, writes: "In this story, God does not give the people what they ask for. They want Moses to get God to "take away the serpents from us" (Numbers 21:7). But the serpents do not go away, nor do they stop biting. Instead, God instructs Moses on how to heal the people who are bitten; they are still bitten, but they live." Maybe this is the challenge of eternal life: looking to Jesus doesn't mean everything is roses and rainbows. There is still hurt, pain, suffering, and death. There are still bee stings that cover your body sometimes....and they hurt.

-But, looking to Christ and entering into eternal life right here right now can bring us to a different place. May you be able to see Christ's love in your life now and in the future, even despite the pain of the bee stings. Amen.