A Wounded Healer
A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 18th, 2012
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up... . For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world should be saved through him.

In a memorable scene from the film Raiders of the Lost Ark Indiana Jones and Sallah have just opened the Well of the Souls. As the two men begin to peer into the well, Sallah asks Indy, “Indy, [tell me], why does the floor move?”

Indiana asks Sallah for his torch and drops it immediately into the well.
The camera now peers into the well and then focuses on Indiana’s fear-stricken face.

“Snakes,” he says, “Why’d it have to be snakes?”

“Asps...,” Sallah answers, “...very dangerous. You go first.”

I’ve been living all week with these fiery serpents from the Book of Numbers, these venomous snakes that poison the wilderness wanderers, and with Indy I’ve been asking myself the same question, “Why’d it have to be snakes?”

Anything but snakes. Very dangerous. Yes, a very dangerous text, I’ve been thinking. Surely forty years of desert sands slapping you in the face was bad enough without having poisonous serpents snapping at your heels, especially poisonous serpents which, as the story goes, were sent by none other than the God of the wanderers—the LORD. Very dangerous. Yes, a very dangerous text, I think.

As you can tell, I’m not so fond of snakes. It’s not that I’m so terrified of snakes, I just need to know when they’re in the neighborhood; I don’t like being surprised by them. A glass wall between the two of us, such as they have at the zoo, can also be a very big help; but I don’t like the idea of snakes sharing my tattered tent, out there in the desert wilderness, and then, thinking they have been sent there by the LORD. This is very dangerous.

My father was one of the few people I’ve known who was willing to say that there are good snakes and there are bad snakes. Most of us are probably thinking, “The only good snake I know is a dead snake,” but Dad claimed that the common garter snake was good because it helped control the rodent population around the granaries. The common bull snake was not so good, he said, because it sometimes got to the chicken house before we could get there. I’m thinking it was our henhouse where, at the age of five or six, I was first surprised by a snake as I reached for an egg.

So today, I’m very grateful that there are several thousand years standing between us and those deadly agents—seraphs in the Hebrew—literally “burning ones,” possibly so-called because of their fiery appearance or the effect of their venom traveling up the leg or causing a person to burn up with fever. Although it might seem strange for a snake-like creature to have wings, as in Isaiah’s vision, two of the texts where seraphim are snakes describe them as “flying,” maybe because of their quick, darting movements.
It is good to have some years between us and those “burning ones” who traveled for a time with the wilderness wanderers as they set out from Mount Hor “by the road to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom—again.” The problem this time is that the King of Edom would not allow Moses to use the more direct route into the Promised Land, forcing the people to “take the long way home.”

By now, the Israelites have had quite enough of the desert wilderness. By now, all they want is to get on the expressway, “The King's Highway” as it is called, leading straight into Canaan. No more “long and winding roads.” But it won’t be “The King’s Highway.” So, the people become “impatient,” they “give out,” they “get short,” this time, not only with Moses, but also with God: “The people spoke against Moses and against God, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?... . There’s no bread or water, and we detest this worthless food.’”

Several chapters earlier, looking through rose-colored glasses at their past, the people had whined to Moses, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”

Forty years is a long time for anyone to survive in the old sandbox of Kadesh, long enough for us to “get short” and to “give out,” long enough for us to give up gratitude and to take on grumbling. Later, the prophet Jeremiah would tell how dreadful the ancient wilderness was for the Israelites: “…a land of desert sands and rift valleys, through a land of drought and deep darkness, through a land in which no one travels, and where no one lives?”

The wilderness experience has a serpentine way of slithering into the most grateful hearts, poisoning those hearts with apathy, monotony, boredom, grumbling. When you are so disoriented, groping in the blasted wilderness for so long—not sure who you are, not sure where you’re going, not sure what purpose is left for you—well, life can become a very monotonous, even monstrous wilderness swarming with poisonous snakes. You can become cynical and dissatisfied and sarcastic even in your relationship to God, perhaps especially in your relationship to God from whom it seems you have received nothing but undelivered promises and grievous disappointments.

Sarcastically the people ask Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?” How can they go on when there seems to be no future? How can we go on when there seems to be no future? What is to be done when we have hoped and prayed and labored for that which seems to recede farther and farther into the distance? What is to be done when someone never reaches the security for which she has worked so hard? What is to be done when another is never
able to heal a relationship that has long been broken? What is to be done if someone never seems to accomplish what he set out to do? What is to be done if the mission to which we have devoted a lifetime never reaches a revival? What is to be done if I never become the person I've hoped I could be. What then?

Please, put us on “The King’s Highway” straight into the Promised Land. Enough of going in circles. Enough of going nowhere. Sometimes we, too, feel that we’ve been in the desert too long, circling without ever reaching the land which was promised us. We, too, may pass through seasons of life when we are discontent, when the morning sun no longer rescues us, and when we yearn for happier days, even if the days were spent as slaves in Egypt. Hope is swept away in the sandstorms. Faith erodes with the dunes. Love turns to resentment. And the soul cries, “Anywhere but here.” And judgment is invited to share our tattered tent.

One of the reasons that the Bible speaks frequently of snakes is that Israel’s neighbors were very fond of them. A prevalent belief among these nations was that images of serpents would keep them away and also heal the wounds inflicted by them. So, the hooded cobra on the head piece of the mighty Pharaoh of Egypt was there to protect him by spitting venom at his enemies. The Sumerian god of healing walked around with two intertwined snakes upon his weird staff—an image both of threat and ointment, poison and medicine twined together in the act of healing. So, “the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.’”

Sometimes we must hurt in order to heal. Maybe the fire and pain, deadly as it is, can bring healing to the apathy and boredom. Take confession and absolution. Real, individual, personal confession sometimes hurts very badly. You may think you’re going to die. Yet, real, individual, forgiveness of sins is often profoundly healing because you have to face the snake that bites you, because you can no longer cover over the deeper symptoms of your sickness.

The hard reality is that we are often wounded before we are healed. Sometimes the function of those fiery serpents can provide the pain that brings us to our senses. Sometimes the experience of coming close to death can bring to memory how much we are grateful for the gift of life. And sometimes, as the writer Joseph Campbell has said, “We must be willing to get rid of the life we planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us.”

In a commentary on this passage, the rabbis state that “it is not the snake but rather what looking at the raised snake causes us to do... . Whenever Israel looked upward and submitted their heart to their Father in heaven, they were healed.” So says the Gospel of John that the Son of Man is lifted up so that we can see the passionate love of God; so that our relationship to God and neighbor may be healed; so that gratitude might again overtake grumbling; so that life would emerge from death.

Sometimes with this One who is lifted up, it feels like something is both wounded and dying in order that something would be reborn and live. One day the pole appears again in another godforsaken place, high on a hill, though not yet green, overlooking Jerusalem. God has taken to the pole—God, so that all those who know they are dying in the wilderness can be healed and live.

“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of great love with which he loved us even when we
were dead through our false steps, made us alive together with Christ.”

*The title for this sermon is borrowed from a book by a similar name written by Father Henri Nouwen in the late 1970s.*