

There's a thing I do fairly frequently. It's pretty ridiculous, but I don't think I'm alone in doing it. Please let me know if you can relate:

I'm feeling a bit hungry, so I go into the kitchen and open the fridge. Inside, I see leftovers from last night's dinner and think, "Nah. I just ate that yesterday." So, I go to the cupboard, where we have all kinds of ingredients and seasonings. I look at them and think, "Nah. That stuff takes too long to prepare; I want something now." So, I go to the snack shelf, where we have several tasty treats, but I think, "Nah. These are all sweet treats; I want something salty." Finally, I throw my hands in the air and proclaim, "We have nothing to eat in this house!"

Isn't that ridiculous? How ungrateful am I to be surrounded by so much abundance and still have the nerve to say, "There's nothing to eat in this house?" It's very ridiculous, but I'm pretty sure that I'm not the only one who does it. Let's have a show of hands. It's Lent, and God is watching, so let's get honest with ourselves: Who does this? All of us.

The good news is that we are not alone either. The ancient Hebrews in the book of Numbers apparently had the same problem we do now. These people had seen literal miracles as God liberated them from slavery in Egypt: the ten plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, water from the rock, manna, and quail. Surely, by this point, the people of Israel should be convinced that God would protect and provide for them, no matter what circumstances they faced next. And yet, as we can clearly see in our first reading this morning, they persist in their complaining. They whine to Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food."

Did you catch their self-contradiction? They said, "there is no food," and in the very next breath, "we detest this miserable food." They are just like me, saying, "There's nothing to eat in this house," while I'm surrounded by a level of bounty that would make medieval kings jealous! I think it's fair to say that the Israelites and I need a very serious attitude adjustment. If you feel yourself to be in need of a similar attitude adjustment, then I invite you to join us as we look closely at what happens next in this text.

The text says, "the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died." Now, if we take this story at face value, we very quickly run into some serious problems. It would lead us to believe that our God is the kind of God who would kill someone just for complaining. It would also lead us to believe that natural events, like snake bites, happen because God wills it as a form of punishment. If we really believed all that, we wouldn't support organizations like Episcopal Relief & Development because we would think the victims of earthquakes and hurricanes were just wicked sinners being punished by God. But we don't believe that. We believe that God is love. We believe that God stands with those who suffer and with those who work to alleviate suffering in this world. And our belief in that kind of God leads us to go back and read this passage in a different way.

This story may or may not have been based on actual events, but that's beside the point. When the text says that "the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people," I take it to be a reflection of the Israelites' state of mind. The snakes are a symbolic representation of their collective attitude and its effect on their communal life.

Have you ever been around people at work or school who just love to complain about every little thing? I'm talking about the people who always look for the worst in other people and situations. How does it feel to be around them? It's kind of a drag, isn't it? Being around them drains your energy. It's like a poison that saps the life right out of you. Hanging around them kind of feels like walking through a snake pit: you're just waiting for one to jump out and bite you. So, when I read this story about people and their attitudes, the snake analogy makes a whole lot of sense to me.

When times are hard, it's easy to focus on what's wrong with the world. It's easy to get caught up in talking about the good old days or the way you wish things were. It feels cathartic to let your frustration out (which is a good thing) but when the catharsis becomes a way of life, it can be toxic. Just as much as honest venting, we also need people who can help us to see what's right in the world. They empower us to make things better. They help us to change our focus.

That's exactly what the Israelite people needed in today's story and that's just what they got. The text says that, "Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live." Isn't this interesting: the people of Israel had a poisonous attitude of complaining that was sucking the life out of their community. So, what's the cure? Look up, focus on this, and you will live. Change your focus in order to change your reality.

Let's fast forward to the New Testament. We also read a story about Jesus today. In this story, Jesus compares himself to Moses' bronze serpent on a pole. It's the same dynamic as before, except that this time, the thing we're supposed to focus on is not a symbolic statue but a living, breathing person. Jesus is, for Christians, the primary revelation of God in the world. When we want to know what God is like, we look at Jesus. When we want to become the kind of people we're meant to be, we look at Jesus. When we need to remember everything that's good, right, beautiful, and holy in this world, we focus on Jesus. When we're ready to be cured of the poisonous attitudes that infect our minds, our community, and our church, we look at Jesus.

We remember the principles he taught us. We reflect on his deeds of healing and forgiveness. We reflect on the love that poured through him to every corner of creation. We do our best to reorient our lives around Jesus' vision. When we feel the snakebite and the poison's burn, we look up to this man who died with forgiveness on his lips for his murderers and we ask ourselves that famous question: "What would Jesus do?"

Change your focus and you change your reality.

Viktor Frankl, famous psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, illustrates this point in a story from the days shortly after his concentration camp was liberated by the Allies, at the end of World War 2. Dr. Frankl writes in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*:

*A friend was walking across a field with me toward the camp when suddenly we came to a field of green crops. Automatically, I avoided it, but he drew his arm through mine and dragged me through it. I stammered something about not treading down the young crops. He became annoyed, gave me an angry look and shouted, "You don't say! And hasn't enough been taken from us? My wife and child have been gassed—not to mention everything else—and you forbid me to tread on a few stalks of oats!" (p. 144)*

The difference between the two friends is remarkable. One man, because of the horrors they had endured, had lost his faith in the dignity of life. The other man, precisely because of the horrors they had endured, became more convinced than ever of the dignity of life, even the life of a few measly plants. This change in attitude has a profound effect on the way we live. Dr. Frankl writes:

*We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. (p. 104)*

When people think about what it means to “have faith,” they usually think about particular religious beliefs. Faith, they think, is about believing that Jesus walked on water or was born of a virgin. But those dogmas mainly have to do with *what* you think. Faith, as Dr. Frankl might use the term, is about *how* you think. Do we see the universe as hostile or friendly? Will we approach life as meaningless or meaningful?

May we, as people of faith, in seasons of conflict and tragedy, learn to shift our focus to the one who came to show us a vision of what life can be. May we become agents of healing from the poisonous attitudes we encounter at home, school, work, or church. In this soul-sucking culture of toxic vision that only sees what's wrong with the world, may we be inspired to become life-giving beacons of faith, hope, and love to all the people around us who so desperately need to hear what Jesus has to say.