



From the Bishop:

October 2025

There are snakes all around us. It might not seem like it, but just like the snakes that surrounded the people of Israel, snakes are surrounding us. Let me remind you of that story found in Numbers 21. The people of Israel had been in the wilderness for almost 40 years and they are tired. They are worn out. They are angry. They are annoyed. There is no water and the manna which God has provided for them is, as the people say, “miserable.” They complain about God and they complain about Moses. And suddenly, in the middle of their complaining, they are surrounded by snakes.

Snakes slithering around them. People running and screaming. People snatching their children up from the ground. Snakes biting and biting and biting. People dying. Finally, desperate, they ask Moses to pray to God on their behalf. And he does. And in response to Moses’ prayer, God sends this message. God commands Moses to lift a rod into the air with a bronze serpent on it for the people to gaze upon. (You can read the full story in Numbers 21:4-9).

Do you see how strange it is for God to command this? To tell them to make a statue of the horrible thing that is killing them? My guess is that they wanted to shield their eyes from this monstrosity. No one wanted to look. Truly when they gazed upon that bronze serpent they saw a scary, horrifying, life-killing image of death. They saw poison and destruction.

But do you know what happens in the story? It is amazing. For when those who were bitten looked up and saw that which scared them the most, what brought the most destruction to them, they were saved. They lived. Out of death came new life.

There are snakes all around us, too. Do you feel them? These snakes take many forms: violence, hatred, greed, despair. Sometimes the snakes look like systems too big to fight. Sometimes they look like shadows in our own hearts. We may want to pretend they are not here. We may want to close our eyes and hope they slither away. But they don’t. They linger, bite, and wound. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we are not spared from being surrounded by snakes.

And just like the Israelites, God calls us not to turn away but to look. To see the truth of what is around us. To name the injustice, the fear, the grief, the death-dealing realities in our midst. This is not easy. Looking at the snakes feels unbearable. But even more, we are called to look beyond the snakes to what is lifted up. For it is only when the people lifted their eyes and saw the bronzed snake could they find life again.

This Numbers story is quoted by Jesus in John 3. There, we hear, *“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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.”*

Jesus is using the Numbers story as an invitation for us as followers of Jesus. We are called to gaze upon something beyond the heartache and violence and all the snakes that are surrounding us. God calls us, just as Moses called the Israelites, to look up.

And what are we called to see? Not a bronzed snake but a cross. The cross. The cross of Christ is our bronzed serpent. On it, we see the ugliest things – violence, betrayal, injustice, sin, death itself. And yet, we are promised that this is exactly where God meets us. It is where Jesus bears what we cannot carry, where God does not hide from the world’s brokenness and, instead, becomes broken for the world. Where God’s promise that even death is transformed to the means of redemption, healing, and abundant life.

The snakes don’t magically disappear. And we are called to confess, grieve, speak, listen, and act in community regarding the snakes. But ultimately, we lift our eyes, our voices, and our actions beyond the snakes towards the new life that is promised – where suffering is met with God’s redeeming love. And in holy community is where we are strengthened again – discovering that healing and new life are possible, always, together, through Christ. Amen.



From the VEEP:

Am I a God near by, says the Lord, and not a God far off?...
Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the Lord. (Jeremiah 23:23-24)

If God is indeed a God near by, why do we use so much language that imagines God as a God far off? If God fills heaven and earth, why do we persist in limiting God to the heavens? So much of our language in worship has imagery that implies a distance between us and God. We let our prayers rise up like incense. We look to the hills for help. We lift our hearts to the Lord. Although we proclaim an omnipresent God, we consistently imagine a God far off.

I find this language problematic in a couple of ways. First, it serves to separate me from God. I believe that God is with me always, knows me intimately and fully, and never abandons me. However, when surrounded by language that describes a God far off in the heavens or on hills and mountaintops, a God separated from and overseeing creation from a great distance, it is sometimes hard to feel that close connection. There is a scene in the movie *Apollo 13* where the astronauts are trying to stay warm and we learn that in the weightlessness of space, our body heat cocoons us if we stay still and in one place. Rather than continually lifting my prayers to God, I prefer to think of my prayers like that - radiating out from me in all directions, reaching a God whose presence surrounds me.

Second, this positional distance reinforces our unconscious cultural bias that up is good and down is bad. Heaven is high above us, while hell is down below. When we esteem and respect someone, we look up to them. When we dislike or disregard people, we look down on them. We consider merit on a vertical axis rather than a horizontal or even multidimensional one. We report to our higher ups and supervise those below us. This language has an impact on our worldview and our behavior. We tend, for example, to vote for the taller of two candidates, all other things being equal. This can put women at a disadvantage because on the whole women are shorter than men. We also may come to think less of those we physically look down upon and better of those we crane our necks to see. This can create an unconscious bias against those below our field of vision, such as wheelchair users. Because we literally overlook them, we also begin to disregard their worth. This up/down belief system even worms its way into our language incorrectly, as in referring to someone of poor status as “the low man on the totem pole,” when in actuality totem poles are not typically carved in a vertical hierarchy. Sometimes the lowest figure is the most important, supporting the rest of the images. Sometimes the figures have no vertical meaning at all. Regardless of what our Indigenous siblings tell us, though, we persist in using the phrase in a demeaning fashion. When we use language this way, we place those who we feel are beneath us even farther from God than we ourselves are.

Please understand that I am not advocating for getting rid of all positionally distancing language in worship. Many of the verses and hymns that use these words are among my favorites. It is just that we need to be aware of our biases and how they show up in worship. We should be more attuned to how and when our language might be distancing us from God and one another. Our God is a God near by, not a God far off. Perhaps we should pray more often in words attributed to St. Patrick: “Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise.” This might help us remember that God fills heaven and earth and all the space between.

Here's what I and/or the Synod Council have been up to in September:

- August 31 (almost September): I attended Shepherd of the Valley's transitional service as they moved from Maple Valley to Black Diamond.
- September 10: The Policy Review Committee met to finalize the *NWWA Synod Process for Synod Calls* and review our *Mission in Washington Endowment Fund Policy*.
- September 13: The Synod Equity Listening Team held a training retreat at 7400 Woodlawn.
- September 20: Synod Council met. Among other agenda items we approved the minutes of the Synod Assembly, approved new compensation guidelines, and extended several synod calls.