

The entire Bible has 66 books in it; out of them are 39 books in the Old Testament. And out of those 39 books, there are books people like to read a lot. I think the Book of Numbers is one of those books we do not read often.

First of all, why is the book called “Numbers”? The reason is that this book talks about numbers, number of people, who survived the Exodus, and number of people who will enter the Promised Land. If you read the book, the first chapter begins with a census of the people who made it through exodus. And there is another census taken in chapter 26.

I was told that year 2009 is the year of census too here in this country. As a nation it is important to know exactly how many people we have; this helps us not only to know where we are but also to make plans and policies for the future. But for the Israelites who were still in the middle of their journey, the census was to go to war. They wanted to know how many soldiers they had. That was why they only counted men, 20 years old and over, not women and children. For the second census, of course, there was another reason which was to allocate land according to the numbers of each tribe once they arrived in the Promised Land.

But the Book of Numbers is more than just counting numbers of people; it has itineraries of their journeys, rules, ritual prescriptions, and wilderness stories, including the stories of people who were complaining. The book only has 36 chapters; but, to me, this little book tells us the whole thing about who we are as humans and more importantly who the God we trust is.

The main image is this: God is the God of promise. Although people always change, God never changes; people grumble, they take God’s love for granted, they even turn their backs on God, but God is faithful to them no matter what! God gives them second chances all the time and God’s will for the Promise Land is ever present throughout the Book.

Having said that, today's particular story seems very weird. It says God sent 'fiery serpents' to attack His people. Some translations say "poisonous" snakes.

Then, my question is why snakes? I understand that God was also kind of angry with the people when they said they were sick and tired and did not know why they had to leave Egypt in the first place. Sure, we complain; we get upset; we even ask questions to God; I think it is normal for us to do that! We are not gods; we are just vulnerable human beings who worry, get hurt, and fail. So I understand when the Israelites complained to God when they had to go around the land of Edom while they knew that there was a short cut.

"Boy, why do we have to do this; things would have been a lot easier had we not done this and that!"

But what the Bible teaches us is that we do not ever look back; we are only supposed to look forward. God had a plan for Israel and he still has a plan for them. Nothing has changed yet; what they did not know was there would always be challenges on their way to the Promised Land.

Sure, we sometimes have to go around; it may take a lot longer than we expected; there will be hills. But never complain; you will get there no matter what.

The important thing is that "It is not you but I, God, who started this whole thing. I am the one who brought you out of Egypt, not you! I will take care of you; I will lead you all the way."

Ok, God, that sounds good. But still, wasn't it too harsh for you to send all those fiery snakes to kill your people?"

This is one of those questions we find hard time answering. This is one of the issues we have been talking about in our Bible study meetings. Is the God we trust really violent? How can we explain

such a violent image of God while the God in Jesus is portrayed as the one who just has love and compassion for sinners like us? That is a hard question we have as Christians.

Another question is “Does God have a temper?” At least, that is what I feel from today’s text. But the big picture is God is the one who forgives. As soon as people see their colleagues die, people come before Moses and say, “Sir, we are sorry; we have sinned by speaking against the Lord and you. Please ask God to take away those snakes.” And the text says, God orders Moses to do another weird thing. “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” Then, my question is why a serpent again? We all know serpents or snakes are not good animals to be around, especially in the bible.

However, Eliezer Segal, a Jewish scholar from University of Calgary shares this interesting story. He says that while snakes have often been identified as Satan both in Christian and Jewish faith, Jews have never understood Satan to be a rebel against divine authority. In his role as a sort of cosmic prosecuting attorney, Satan is given the jobs of testing and testifying against us before the heavenly court. It's a dirty job but somebody has to do it to maintain order in the world.”

The ancient rabbis equated snakes and Satan with an evil force but he says this translation is dangerously misleading. According to the Jewish understanding, he says, God implanted into every human being this evil force, a drive that combines features of ambition, greed and sexual desire.

So this guy, Satan, is a bad guy everyone has within his or her mind.

One day, Professor Segal says, some Jewish sages had a meeting and made a conclusion saying, “Ok, if we could just get rid of this guy, Satan, from us; the world would be perfect; people in the world would become saints; let’s capture and kill the guy.

They did; they caught the beast and bound it in chains, eagerly awaiting the moment when they would remove it from the world for all time.

But soon, strange reports started arriving: Nobody was showing up at work anymore. No one wanted to marry or raise families. The chickens were not laying eggs!

Now these sages came to the realization that they had misunderstood the nature of this "evil urge." For the drives represented in that faculty are essential for the proper functioning of humanity as God planned us to live our lives. The urge is not "evil" in any absolute sense, but only when it is allowed to trespass beyond its legitimate domain.

Sexuality is a wonderful gift when invested in a loving marriage and family, but can be changed into a force for hatred and abuse. And ambition can be a good thing when it is used towards spiritual creativity and service of humanity, but becomes a curse when it is twisted into unrestricted ego.

The conclusion is that our role as humans is not to eliminate the serpent in us but to keep it under control and direct it to a productive course, Professor Segal says.

Then, what is it that we need to hear from today's texts?

When God told his people to look at the serpent on a pole, Professor Segal says, He did not mean that the piece of bronze would have a magical power to heal the wounds of those who had been bitten. Rather, "God was asking them to look beyond the pole; God wanted them to lift up their eyes and gaze upward; God wanted them to submit their hearts to their Father in Heaven; God wanted them to use their serpents in their hearts for a good cause—and this would bring about their cure." ([http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/Shokel/Preaching/S970309\\_Serpent.html](http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/Shokel/Preaching/S970309_Serpent.html))

Maybe God was rather asking his people to look at the serpent, the evil power within them, and to remind them of how arrogant they had been or how far they had been off the limits.

So, to me, the order to look at the pole is a Lenten invitation for all of us to look at our insides. God is giving us an invitation to look back on ourselves; who we are and how we are as humans.

Same thing is true with what Jesus said in John's Gospel: "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."

We are asked by Jesus to look upon ourselves, to look at ourselves, to see and recognize how weak and vulnerable we are.

Faith needs courage to be honest to ourselves; sometimes we are too generous to ourselves while we are hard toward others; during this Lent, I hope, with the help of the Spirit, we all have the guts to look at the pole, look at the cross, look at ourselves in a different light.

Amen.