

Blessed be the Name of the Lord, henceforth and for evermore.

Last summer, on the summer youth mission trip to Hurley, VA – a few of us were went up the hill to help a man renovating his house. He needed extra space for the grandchildren he was raising, now that their own parents were in town. A few members of the extended family were there, and we were sent in to do the grunt work of hauling freshly poured concrete down a little embankment to the molds which would serve as a foundation for a future basement wall. As we worked, the older children watched the younger children in the yard, and one particularly gregarious 9 year old chattered away, pestering us while we worked.

At one point during the morning, a shout went up – “Copperhead” – and pandemonium broke loose. The family leapt into action. “Get the baby!” said one of the cousins. “Get the little ones inside!” It all happened so fast that it took me a moment to figure out what was going on. There’d been a Copperhead sighting – and, as one guy informed me, “those things are mean. If you see one, it’s coming after you – so it’s either you or them. Choose.”

One of the men grabbed the nearest blunt instrument – one of the hefty shovels on the work site used for filling the cement molds. He took the metal end and used it like a guillotine – deftly severing the snake and nearly chopping it in half. And, because apparently Copperheads are still quite dangerous even after being killed – their jaws still operate on a reflex motion and the fangs can still deliver a powerful venom – so it was important to get the remains of the snake out of the vicinity as soon as possible. They used the shovel to toss it down the hill, into the

woods – I have a picture of it, taken from a safe distance of course, dangling from a tree branch that it wrapped around as it flew.

It was a dramatic moment, to be sure – the people knew the danger, and worked quickly to dispatch with the source of the danger. I was impressed with the efficiency of the operation – living in the hills of southwestern Virginia, I suppose, a Copperhead is likely never very far away. And let's just say that I was quite attentive to where I placed my steps for the rest of my time in Hurley.

Of all of my encounters with snakes over the years, I'd say this was probably the most hair-raising – a far cry from the frequent sightings of little thin garter snakes in the lawn we used to spot fairly regularly during the hot Minnesota summers of my youth. And yet, even though these garter snakes were harmless, it was still yet another reason for this introvert to stay inside where it was safe and read more books. I wouldn't say I have an overt fear of snakes, necessarily, but I do think about the plague of serpents visited upon the people of Israel in today's reading from Numbers with a kind of gruesome empathy.

Moses was contending with a people who were – yet again – grouching about the food. The people that God had miraculously lead out of captivity in Egypt were so quick to forget the blessing of God's continuing providence. They had complained of being hungry, and God rained down manna from heaven. When they demanded hydration, God brought water from a rock to slake their thirst. When the vegetarian diet became onerous to them, God sent them an abundance of quail. Next up was, "how long are we going to have to eat the same old thing?"

And so God sends a plague of snakes – the last time, perhaps not incidentally, that we have record of them complaining about the food. And as you might expect, some people got bit, and those who were bit, died. To their credit, the Israelites realize the error of their ways, and ask Moses to intercede on their behalf. God's solution? Moses casts bronze in the shape of a serpent, puts it on a stick, and places it in the sight of the people – “and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.”

In the recent film *Lady Bird*, by Greta Gerwig, the young protagonist – a senior at a Catholic high school – wants nothing more than to break free from her home town, to go to where culture is, and to get accepted into a college on the East Coast – far from humdrum Sacramento, where she's lived all her life. It's a thoughtful film, with some startling and refreshing theological insights – for one thing, the nuns and priests are portrayed as real people, with interests and passions and flaws – and faith itself is seen as a positive thing (though admittedly counter-cultural at the same time.) *Lady Bird* has just written a raft of college admission essays – an experience with which I dare say some of our own seniors here at St. Alban's are quite recently well acquainted – and her teacher, Sister Sarah Joan, tells *Lady Bird*,

“You clearly love Sacramento.”

Lady Bird blinks, “I do?”

The nun replies, “You write about Sacramento so affectionately and with such care.”

“I was just describing it,” *Lady Bird* replies. “I guess I pay attention.”

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Sister Joan responds, "Don't you think maybe they are the same thing? Love and attention?"

We notice those things that get in the way of growing in our own discipleship journey – the austerity of this season allows us to see with greater clarity not only those things which serve to destroy us, but also to notice – to pay attention to – to love – that which gives us life. As we continue this Lenten journey, I invite you to attend to that Christ that invites us – you and me, today, here, at this table – to go deeper.

Amen.