

Numbers 21:4-9

⁴They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵ they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”

⁶Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷ The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” ⁹ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

John 3:14-21

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

“Just Enough of a Bad Thing”
The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee
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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I sometimes get lulled into a false sense of security for Shelby, my loveable Cockapoo. Living for now on the very quiet lane of the Merrifields’ home, I have gotten into the practice of letting Shelby out the back door early for the first of her morning ablutions. I don’t bother to put on her harness, and I figure that slippers are plenty for my own feet. I trust that she will do her business and turn around when I call. This has been true on all but two occasions. The first was no big deal, apart from the fact that it was snowy and when Shelby tracked some irresistible scent around the house to the wood pile, it was a cold walk for me. The only time I was truly worried for her (for her, and not for the chickens across the street or the big old dog that lives two doors down), she was doing her usual sprinting away from me when I let her off leash. She dashes and then turns back as if to ask permission; dashes and then turns back to make sure I am there. On one of the recent sunny days, I let her run ahead, and again chasing an irresistible scent, she ran around a bend, just a bit out of my sight. I called in the way my summer neighbor mocks, “Shelby, Come!” and she ignored me as she chased the echo of some ancient rival. But then I heard the rumble of a truck—Amazon delivers to the house at the end of the road quite regularly. “Shelby, Come!” got louder and more fierce as I ran around the bend, grabbed her harness when she had stopped for a stick, and waited on the side of the road with her as the driver passed us by on the way to Falls Bridge Road.

Shelby has an independent streak. This is a streak that is highlighted by her favorite snack, one that is left behind by either neighbors’ chickens in the backyard in Camden or left behind here by the deer that pass through the yard fairly often. I have tried to tell her in the most clear of human terms, that eating poop is not good for her and is, frankly, disgusting. Not to be dissuaded, when we return from our walk down the lane and I mistakenly think she will obediently follow me to and through the front door, Shelby sometimes dashes to the woodpile where one such detestable snack remains despite my having flicked it farther into the woods.

Hurrying last week to head to church one afternoon, Shelby ran a bit farther and found herself a big pile, and simply and completely refused to come when I called. When I got to her, rushing as I was, I swatted her behind to let her know in no uncertain terms that she was not to eat poop and was to come when I called. I'm not quite sure she made the connection. Sometimes her disobedience can be kind of cute, when she runs ahead and then turns back; sometimes her disobedience can be annoying; sometimes, her disobedience scares me.

When we adopted Shelby three years plus ago, she had a little sister, Daisy. Also a Cockapoo, Daisy was also an old girl, 8 at the time, and just over half Shelby's size. At 13 and a half pounds, Daisy was the kind of miniature dog I used to say didn't even qualify. She was a charmer, though, and some of my favorite memories are of her off leash at Blair Academy, where in the first snow we experienced together, she frolicked, jumping like a baby goat. Daisy liked to frolic. Daisy was also not especially obedient; she was a free thinker. On the day that I moved into the new house in Camden, celebrating what felt like a lifelong dream come true as I hefted furniture with friends, Daisy dashed past my legs when I propped the door open to push through an easy chair. Excited by all the new smells and activity, Daisy ran so quickly around the house that I hadn't even had time to put the chair down when she was hit by a car.

You'd think that I would never let Shelby off leash or out of my sight, wouldn't you? I do know that she comes when I call most of the time, and nearly always when I make my voice especially stern, but most of the time is not all the time. I love to see her cuteness when we hike and she runs ahead, and back, ahead and back. When I hear trucks, or see big dogs off leash, or on leash when she is not, I am afraid for her safety. I want Shelby to live. I don't want her to die or to suffer in any way, ever. She is my dog, after all. And don't get me started on my children.

Or do . . . What I wouldn't give to keep my children safe, happy and alive. But I can't live their lives for them, just as my mother couldn't live my life for me. I can still hear her say to me when I took up riding motorcycles in my early twenties, "I wish you were 17 so that I could forbid you." But would forbidding me have helped any? We human beings are an independent sort. We are also kind of cute

sometimes, aren't we, when we run ahead and then look back? We are also pretty exasperating sometimes, when we are given everything we need to live, but take it for granted, or minimally are less than grateful.

Freed from slavery and degradation in Egypt, promised a new land in Canaan, the Israelites had begun to whine again. Their murmuring was bubbling up again, and Moses had kind of lost control of his flock in this way. When they had gone through an earlier period of food scarcity and thirst, God had provided for them manna from heaven, sustenance in the midst of famine, but they wanted more. Despite having been shown time and again that God had in mind for them a blessed future that included earthly power and comfort, they were growing impatient again. I don't mean to suggest to you that I am altogether comfortable with the idea of God causing fiery serpents to bite and poison people to prove a point, but I have been trying to understand the end of God's rope. As those of us in Thursday's Bible study reflected this week, we rest in the assurance that God loves us. When we begin with that certitude, I read this story a bit differently. God's extremely large, earthly family doesn't always run back, and sometimes even runs ahead without pause. God wants all of us to live, and tries repeatedly to call us to live in such a way that we will not just endure, but will prosper. And sometimes we figuratively spit in the face of God's generosity, and make choices that will damn us in our relationships and maybe even lead us to death. To protect as many of us as possible, to what length would a frightened, sad parent go? We are off leash, and one of the dangers may look like snakes.

I am not sure that there is such minute consideration on God's part. We cannot know the mind of God, after all. Still, I knew that when I became a mom I would never spank my children. And then Keira, the toddler, ran away from me on the long driveway in Connecticut, on a road that rarely saw traffic. I called her back gently, then more firmly, and then, as an infrequent car made its way toward the end of the driveway, I sprinted toward her and when I got to her—I didn't enfold her in my arms. I spanked her. I wanted her to live. I do not like this memory for a lot of reasons, and I often wonder if I would have done anything differently had I had a moment to pause. Still, I wanted her to remember that she *must not* run into the road. If that had been my own driveway, I would have put up a sign before the end of it, with a picture of a car, to remind her why she must not run beyond that

point. Or maybe with a picture of her bottom, and my hand. “¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” We need reminders, don’t we, even placed on top of a pole? God, our loving parent, did not stand back and keep trying the same ways to keep us from hurting ourselves in our disobedience. God provided the Israelites with everything they needed, if not with everything they wanted and just exactly when they wanted it. Sometimes, we have to wait with patience and with trust to know that all will be made right in the end. Eternity is beyond our knowing, but we can know God. God so loved the world that God walked among us, showing us by example how we may live in such a way that all of God’s creation might prosper. And when we continued to test the extent of our freedom in ways that threatened our very existence, God godself was lifted up for us. Wouldn’t you do just about anything to keep your loved ones from perishing?

When I landed on a title for this week’s sermon, I was first led to think about the way that vaccinations like the one for which we are grateful today injects into us just a bit of the virus so that we may not be overcome by too much of that bad thing. I had thought that perhaps this was akin to God’s using the snakes’ own venom to save those who were bitten by them. Sometimes a little bit of a bad thing is just what we need in order to recognize what we need to avoid. At other times, we need significant signposts to keep us from making the same mistakes repeatedly. For all my discomfort in the wrathful God I recognize in the story of Moses’ followers through the wilderness, I begin to wonder differently. From what will we learn, finally, to be grateful for what we have and to be obedient to the one who calls us forward? I wonder what you make of this passage, as well. Let us pray.

Loving God, our mother and father, we thank you for your many gifts that sustain us. Please help us to trust that you want for us eternal and abundant life, and strengthen us to use our independence wisely. Amen.