I wonder …

By Elizabeth A. Eaton

Recently, I heard the Bach cantata *O heilges Geist und Wasserbad.* The cantata’s text is based on John 3:1-15, which was the Gospel lesson at the service where the cantata was first performed. The image that stuck with me and about which I have been doing a lot of thinking was the story of the fiery serpents sent among the people of Israel in the wilderness.

Both the Gospel lesson for the day and the Bach cantata allude to this. You might remember this tense episode during the Exodus. The people of God had been liberated from crushing oppression in Egypt—the plagues, Passover, walking dry-shod through the sea, manna from heaven and water from the rock! We can only imagine the excitement of those heady days when God set Israel free.

But now the journey had become long and they had to detour around Edom. The people became impatient and angry. They began to murmur. They had murmured before against Moses and Aaron, but now their murmuring was directed at God. It turned out to be the same old laundry list of complaints: “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” (Numbers 21:5).

Now remember, this “miserable food” was manna from heaven. God promised to provide enough for each person each day. They were to collect no more and no less than a day’s supply. Some collected more, not trusting that God would be faithful. Some collected less. These were the Lutheran Israelites, who did not believe that God’s all sufficient love was for them too.

Enter the snakes. “Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died” (Numbers 21:6). A calamity had befallen the people. In their panic and in their pain they pleaded for deliverance. God rescued Israel, not so much from poisonous serpents but from Israel’s own faithless and poisonous complaints that had appeared long before the snakes did. In that faithlessness, Israel had set itself against God.

Israel’s rescue was a restored relationship with their true God, not simply escaping the snakes. God rescued Israel both from themselves and from God’s judgment. The symbol of their salvation was a fiery serpent—a bronze serpent lifted up on a pole. The very image of suffering and death was also the image of life and salvation.

This is what Jesus was talking about in his encounter with Nicodemus. “And 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” (John 3:14-15). This is what Bach’s cantata sings about: “You know, my God, how painfully I feel the old serpent’s sting; sin’s poison destroys my body and soul. Help me, so that in faith I choose you, blood-red image of a serpent, that was raised on the cross.” The cross in John’s Gospel, like the pole with the bronze serpent, signifies both the poison of death and the life-giving power of God.

I have read Numbers several times and there is no indication that the serpents ever left. The plague of serpents remained an ongoing threat and the raised bronze serpent remained an ongoing reminder of the need to turn to the healing power of God.

And here’s what really has me thinking—the word for fiery serpent is “seraphim.” Seraphim. The same angels who, with the cherubim, attend God. Could the fiery serpents be snake-angels that like border collies nip at us when we go our own way? Could the sting of their bite remind us to look to the cross, the death of our death? Could the snake-angels be fiery guardian angels who bring us back to the truth that, left to our own devices, we are helpless and sometimes dangerous and apart from God, that we can do nothing?

Just wondering.

A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Her email address: **bishop@elca.org**. This column originally appeared in *Living Lutheran*’s May issue. Reprinted with permission.