

# Looking Fear in the Eyes



BY AMY STARR REDWINE

The book of Numbers chronicles most of the 40 years the Israelites spent wandering through the wilderness after God freed them from slavery in Egypt and before they reached the Promised Land. In one strange episode, the Israelites are complaining (yet again) about how hard life is in the wilderness. There is no food and water and they hate the food (not logical, but most whining isn't!). This time, the Israelites don't just complain against Moses; they complain against God.

God responds with a vengeance, sending poisonous snakes to the camp, killing many of the people. The people admit their sinfulness and beg Moses to intervene with God. When Moses does, God tells him to make a figure of a snake and put it up on a pole. If a person gets bitten, all they have to do is look at the pole and they will live (21:4–9).

It's no ordinary solution. But these were no ordinary snakes. The Hebrew word for them is *seraphim*—the same word used elsewhere in the Old Testament for fiery serpent creatures, some earthly, others heavenly. In other words, these snakes are messengers from God—angels of a sort. Although they aren't always deadly, biblical messengers from God tend to elicit fear. “Do not be afraid” is usually the first thing they say.

The seraphim in Numbers 21 don't calm the Israelites' fears; they evoke fear—of snakes, of death. The antidote for the bite is looking away from the snake at one's feet and looking at another snake. God seems to be reminding the Israelites that the only way to deal with fear is to face it. The only way through the wilderness is, yep, through the wilderness.



*You Don't Scare Me, Denise M. Cassano*

## Name Your Fear

All parents know a thing or two about fear. From the moment our children are conceived, we discover that the world is full of hidden dangers we never noticed before. Then, when children get old enough, we parents hear about their fears. As parents, how do we deal with fear—our own and our children's—in a way that doesn't just repress it so that it resurfaces later?

In *The Whole-Brain Child*, the authors suggest the “Name It To Tame It” strategy to help children deal with fears and other difficult situations. When a fear or other difficult emotion arises in a child's life, we can help our children better understand it by encouraging them to tell and retell the story of the experience. Doing this helps a child to integrate the emotions of the event with a rational understanding of it.\*

This strategy is based on the latest brain research, but it echoes the Israelites' experience in the wilderness, when the cure for the snake bite is to look at a snake. It also reflects what we do to integrate our faith with our everyday experiences: tell stories. We read the same Bible stories—many of which are disturbing and scary!—over and over again. These stories remind us that by facing our fears, we can encounter God, the only One truly able to receive our fears, help us make sense of them and ultimately transform them into new life.

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\**The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind*, by Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson (New York: Random House, 2011), page 27.