

## *Snake on a Stick*

A Sermon Preached by the  
Reverend Gale Robb  
March 22, 2009  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
Bloomington, Minnesota

Numbers 21:4-9  
John 3:14-21

One of our family's favorite camp songs has always been the one that begins, "All God's critters got a place in the choir. . ." I've always been a firm believer in giving all of God's critters a place in the choir – except snakes. I don't care if they can sing lower or higher or coil around the telephone wire, and even if they could clap their hands or paws or anything else they've got, no snakes in the choir. Don't get me wrong – I'm not opposed to snakes in general, or having snakes in the world (well, maybe a little bit), I just don't want to get up close and personal with a snake. Over the years, the Robb household has hosted cats, rats, squirrels, dogs, lizards and fish. But no snakes. I always drew the line at snakes.

I still remember my encounter with a snake in our garage one hot summer afternoon, a little garter snake that the cat had found and actually had in his mouth, when I walked out the back door. I bravely instructed the cat to drop the snake – and amazingly he did. Thank goodness I didn't have to pry it out of his mouth. I put the cat in the house and went back to the garage with a shovel, to pick up the dead snake and carry it into the woods behind the house where it could have a decent burial in the leaves. Imagine my surprise when about halfway there the snake suddenly came to life and slithered off the shovel and disappeared in the grass. I nearly passed out. So, I'm sorry, no snakes.

Whether it's the snake in the story of the Garden of Eden or the little garden-variety that slithers across our feet when we're working in the yard, there's something about snakes that demands our full attention. It's no wonder that when writers or film-makers want to strike terror in the hearts of their consumers, they throw in a few snakes. From the Indiana Jones movies to the more recent "Snakes on a Plane," snakes make most of us squirm.

In the ancient world, snakes were powerful symbols of both healing and harm. We've all seen pictures or visited museum exhibits with antiquities from Egypt that depict Pharaohs wearing headpieces with a hooded cobra on them. The snake was there to protect the mighty Pharaoh by spitting venom on his enemies, should anyone attempt to harm him.

The Greek God of Healing carried a snake on his staff, and he could be transformed into a serpent. The Sumerian God of Healing walked around with two intertwined snakes on a staff, a symbol that was later adopted by the American Medical Association, a curious image to be sure. Someone explained it by saying that the snakes represent both threat and healing. That writer goes on to say, "Many of you who have been through surgery recently know that if you get mixed up with these people who work

under the symbol of two snakes twined on a staff, they often hurt you in order to make you whole. Keep that thought in mind.”<sup>1</sup>

In our Old Testament lesson for today from the Book of Numbers, the plague of snakes certainly demands the full attention of the Israelites. You will remember that the Israelites were still complaining, this time not about the lack of food, but about the food itself, saying things like, “Why didn’t God just kill us in Egypt? Why did we have to come out to this God-forsaken place to die? We hate this! We hate the food we have to eat day after day after day! Manna yesterday, manna today, manna tomorrow! And we hate walking every day and never even getting close to the Promised Land!”

Understandably, they were frustrated. They were hot and tired – good grief, forty years is a long time to wander around and not get anywhere! But rather than turning to God in their dismay, they turned against God, and not surprisingly, God responded – although sending a plague of poisonous snakes seems a little heavy-handed, don’t you think? I mean, they weren’t expecting gourmet food, they were only asking for a little variety in the menu!

But you will also remember that they were a people given to quite a lot of whining and complaining. It’s not the first time that Moses had to deal with their complaints, not the first time that they had rebelled against authority or questioned God’s faithfulness. Needless to say, once the snakes started biting and they started watching their loved ones die, they went to Moses and said, “We have sinned against God and against you,” and pleaded with him to talk to God on their behalf. And, once more, Moses did.

You can’t help but be impressed by Moses’ patience. Think about it, he’s not even halfway through this journey, and he’s already had to ask God for the food they’re now unhappy with, and strike a rock to get water for his unruly little band of Israelites; he’s already spent forty days and forty nights at the top of the mountain only to come down and find the whole bunch of them worshipping a golden calf, which made him so angry that he broke the stone tablets, and then had to go back up the mountain to meet God again. It’s a wonder he didn’t just let the snakes have them!

Mercifully, God provided a way out for Israel and for Moses. God instructed Moses to craft a serpent out of bronze, and raise it up on a pole in the center of camp, so that those bitten by the snakes could look upon it and be healed. It’s interesting to note that God didn’t get rid of the snakes, but instead provided a way to get rid of the poison. It sounds a little bit like that old adage about taking some of the “hair of the dog that bit you” to cure a hangover!

Well, if that doesn’t fit your theology, you’re not alone. As one writer put it, “At best, it seems like cheap grace: one glance at a snake on a stick and all is restored. At worst, it reminds us of magic or of those healing idols of winged serpents that were left behind in Egypt.” In fact, problems arose later on when people began to worship the bronze serpent itself. In second Kings, there is the account of King Hezekiah purifying the temple by breaking the bronze serpent that Moses made into pieces because the people had brought offerings to it.

So what’s really going on here? What do those pesky snakes have to tell us about God’s grace? The serpent was a mark of God’s anger and God’s mercy. “God’s people might be saved by the God of life, if only they would look upon the image of that which

---

<sup>1</sup> William Willimon, “Saved by the Snake,” *Pulpit Resource*, January, February, March 2006, p. 54.

would have brought about their death.” By looking at the bronze snake with eyes of faith, the Israelites faced their fear and were healed. But a critical point is that the biblical record is careful to emphasize that the healing came from God, not from the bronze snake. The ancient rabbis explained it this way, in one of the early *mishnahs* or commentaries on holy scripture: “Does the *serpent* either kill or sustain life? Rather whenever Israel looked upward and submitted their heart to their Father in heaven, they were healed.”

One of the commentaries I read noted that, “It is a strange story, inexplicable, and ambiguous. Here is a deep, dark, powerful symbol of salvation. Somehow, in the hands of God, evil and good, threat and promise, life and death are all somehow mixed up. We can’t explain it. But we intuitively know that we are on the threshold of a deep truth. . . The snakes that are the means of death become the way to life.”<sup>2</sup>

And now, the Gospel lesson from John says that Jesus dared to use this image of the serpent on a pole as a way to describe what he was doing to save the world. Jesus was telling the story of the snakes in the wilderness and the snake on a stick to Nicodemus, who had come to him under cover of darkness to ask some questions. It was in response to Nicodemus’ questions about how to be saved that Jesus recounted the story from the book of Numbers. And it is in that response that we come upon one of the most familiar verses in the Bible, the one that most of us probably had to memorize at an early age. One pastor wrote that he felt like he had been required to memorize it in utero! If it’s been a while since you’ve thought about it, look into the stands at the next baseball game. You’ll probably see someone holding a sign that says, “John 3:16” and the words will come back to you.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness so that Israel might be saved, “so must the son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him might have eternal life.”

Now when the Gospel writer uses the phrase “lifted up” in this particular verse, he is referring to the crucifixion. It is the first of three statements in John that talk about Jesus being “lifted up.” Jesus is lifted up on the cross, he is raised from the dead, he ascends into heaven. The word was used to refer to crucifixions, but it was also used to refer to the enthronement of a king. The Gospel writer’s use of the phrase plays on this word usage. He understands that Jesus’ crucifixion is also his enthronement as king.

Like the Israelites in the wilderness gazing upon a bronze serpent and being healed, we who believe turn our eyes to a crucified Christ and receive the gift of healing and wholeness. “By his wounds you have been healed,” said one early Christian writer. But like the Israelites, who found it painful and difficult to stare at the image of a poisonous serpent, it is hard for us to keep our eyes on an image of unimaginable suffering and pain on a cross, it is hard for us to look death in the face.

For a number of years, we had a sign hanging in our kitchen that read, “Some days the dragon wins.” After we moved, I wondered where it was, until I saw it hanging in our son’s kitchen, and remembered that he had asked if he could take it with him when he moved to California. For us, and perhaps especially for a young man leaving home, about to be on his own in a strange city, it was a good reminder of the simple truth that life is not fair and there are no guarantees; that some days pain and sadness overtake us,

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

that some days the world seems unbearably cruel and heartless. Think about it. We see Christ crucified every day. As far away as Darfur and Haiti, in the slums of Mumbai and Zimbabwe; and right here, living under the bridges, standing at freeway exits begging for change, and waiting every night to get into the shelters for the homeless. We catch a glimpse of the figure hanging on the cross and we have to turn away. We avert our eyes because looking at it means our worst fears are realized.

But as one writer said, “The simple equation endures: the cure for snakes is a snake; the cure for human life is one man’s life; the cure for death is death. Nothing less will do. Those whose eyes follow the Son of Man as he is lifted up see God’s healing of the world.”

In the Roman Catholic tradition, this fourth Sunday in Lent is known as *Laetare Sunday*, or “Rejoice Sunday,” from the first words of the Latin liturgy for this day, “Rejoice, O Jerusalem.” In the early church, this Sunday was celebrated as a festival of spring. The first roses were brought to the church for a blessing on this Sunday, and catechumens, or those who were to be baptized on Easter, were bedecked with roses. It seems odd to be talking about rejoicing in the middle of Lent, when we have put away our alleluias for the duration of the season. But it was a reminder that the church was more than halfway through the Lenten discipline and well on the way to Easter joy. The end of winter was in sight and life was restored in abundance. In the middle of Lent, the time when we traditionally re-examine our faith, when we face the fears that hold us captive, when we search for lost treasures and missing pieces of our lives, we do so with the knowledge that our own doubts and fears are not the final word. The springtime of God’s grace is near; Easter will come.

We didn’t read the Epistle lesson for this morning from Ephesians (Ephesians 2:1-10), but it’s the passage that contains these words written to people whom the writer characterized as not just spiritually sick but completely lifeless: “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived.” But then he went on to remind them, “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together in Christ.”

I wonder if you’ve ever noticed that again and again, throughout the scriptures, whenever things seem the bleakest, whenever evil threatens to prevail, the promise is kept alive by two words: “But God. . .”

In Genesis, “Then Israel said to Joseph, ‘I am about to die, *but God* will be with you and will bring you to the land of your ancestors.’” Or this, “As for you, you meant evil against me, *but God* meant it for good.” In the Psalms, “My flesh and my heart may fail, *but God* is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” “*But God* will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, for God shall receive me.”

Like the Israelites, we find ourselves as a nation in the midst of transformation and crisis. There seems to be no end to the complaint and blame. Greed, irresponsibility, and arrogance are only a few of the words flying around these days, and we are all asking anxious questions: where do we stand? When will it end? What should we do? We may well ask if there is anything to rejoice about on *Laetare Sunday*, halfway through this discontented Lenten season.

Thinking about this text and the state of the economy, one pastor says that, “The season itself suggests that there is.” He writes, “Lent is, after all, a time of reflection, repentance, and prayer – a time to allow the Lord to turn us around in faith so that we

may at last be regenerated in the risen life of Easter. And that has little to do with business cycles of the size of our paycheck.”<sup>3</sup>

Some days the dragon wins, *but God* picks us up out of the ditch and puts us back on the road. Sometimes the snakes threaten to undo us, *but God* provides a way out of death into life. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” By God’s grace we can rejoice in that word of hope. Because of the gift of grace, we can face our worst fears, and walk the longest and loneliest road. We can stumble around in the darkness, wondering how we will get beyond the pain, and still, by God’s grace, we can look with eyes of faith beyond the bronze serpent to see the source of our healing. We can look beyond the crucified Christ to catch a glimpse of the joy and healing that is in store for all who will look up to see the light. For God so loved the world. Amen.

---

<sup>3</sup> The Rev. Frank Hegedus, The Episcopal Church Center, March 22, 2009.