

I wonder if any of you have ophidiophobia? If so, you join 36 percent of Americans who claim that the number one thing of which they are afraid is... snakes. But snakes are also used as signs of healing such as in the caduceus, which is often used by medical practitioners to signify healing. Or in the Staff of Asclepius. Asclepius was the Greek God of medicine, and was said to have brought people back from the dead, which got him in trouble with the other Gods. Snakes are also symbols of power and immortality, think of the headdress worn by Pharaoh.

So, apparently the fear of snakes goes waaaay back. Because in our Old Testament reading this morning from the Book of Numbers, snakes are used to great effect. This passage is the last, the *final* time, the Israelites complain in the wilderness. We've heard their complaints before. They complain about the bitter water (Exodus 15), about the lack of food (Exodus 16). They complain about being thirsty (Exodus 17). They complain about manna and wish they had meat (Numbers 11). And they complain about the prospect of invading Canaan (Numbers 14). But this time, they appear to have gone too far, even for a gracious God, one who is slow to anger and quick to show mercy. Because this time, they complain against God.

And God sends snakes, real snakes. And these snakes kill people. I'd like to find some way to tame this passage down, to make it less scary than this picture, but I can't. This story should be scary. I don't think it is a coincidence that God uses the animal that scares us most to scare us straight. And it seems to work for the Hebrew people as. They repent and beg Moses, asking him to intercede on their behalf to their God, against whom they had sinned. And let's be clear about their sin. What got them in so much trouble was not that they lifted up their disappointments to God. It is that they didn't trust God. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?", they complained. They didn't believe in God's promises of LIFE. The whole wilderness experience for the Hebrew people wasn't about getting the people to believe certain beliefs or doctrines about God. It was about getting them to trust that God would lead them to life in a new land, as God had promised. Trusting in the promises of God. It seems like that should be so easy, doesn't it? Yet, we live our lives as if we trust in anything but God. We trust in ourselves. We trust in money. We trust in country—even though our country's motto is "In God we Trust".

Where do you place your trust instead of in God?

The implications of this are huge for us as community. Because if we don't trust God, who created us and loves us, how can we trust our neighbors?

So, the killer serpents, or snakes on a plain, as it were, lead the people to repentance.

And then the weird story gets weirder. God hears Moses entreaties on behalf of the people and commands Moses to “make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.”

I don't know how many of you remember the 10 Commandments, but number one is to have no other Gods and number two is “you shall not make for yourself an idol”.

Here is reason 391 that God never appointed me to be Moses, because if God told me to fashion a bronze serpent, I would likely have reminded God of those first two commandments. “Two words, God: golden calf. Remember how well that worked?”

Luckily for the Hebrew people, Moses obeyed God and made a serpent of bronze and put it on a pole. And whenever a serpent bit someone, the person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Notice that God did not just get rid of the snakes. The dangers of the world were still there with them. But God took a symbol of fear and death and turned it into a symbol of life. Once the people have repented of their sin and turned again to trust in God, the thing that had been killing them becomes the thing that saves them.

And it worked very well, by all accounts, for years and years. Because centuries later, when King Hezekiah is leading reforms and cleaning out the Temple, around 700 BCE, listen to what he does, as recorded in 2 Kings 18:4. “He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan.”

So the chronicler of Hezekiah is making this report to let us know about what a good King Hezekiah was, but what I find interesting about this passage is that it shows that not only did Moses make this serpent, *but that it worked*, because people were still praying to it centuries later. If the people believed that the bronze serpent, and not God, was the agent of their healing, then Hezekiah was right to destroy it. Whenever we mistake the signs and symbols for God, and we begin to worship the signs and symbols, instead of God, then we have made idols. Take the sign and symbol of the Bible. Sometimes people seem to take the Bible so literally, it appears they are worshipping the book instead of the God who is revealed in the book. Or people turn church leaders or church doctrine into idols. One magazine, when describing a church talked about two

competing forces that had been at work in that church over the years—the doctrine of love and the love of doctrine.¹

So, we're reminded not to turn the snakes, or anything else, into idols. One of my favorite preachers, Barbara Brown Taylor, asks this question about the snakes: "What is God capable of doing with those idols, once they have been plucked out from under our feet and set up on a pole where we can see them clearly? How does God respond to our fear, both in the wilderness, and at the foot of the cross?"²

And so we move toward the story in John's gospel, where the connection is made between Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness to bring life from death, to the person of Jesus, who is lifted up on a cross to bring eternal life from death.

Here is an artist's combination of the two stories, with Moses' bronze serpent being lifted up on the cross of Christ.

And even though this reference to the Numbers text is universally overlooked in favor of the next verse—"for God so loved the world....", it is worth spending some time on the connection before moving on to 3:16.

John's gospel has some different themes, or different emphases, perhaps, than do the other gospels. One of them is the theme of being "lifted up". Jesus often refers to the Son of Man being lifted up. On one level, he's referring to the cross event, of his literally being lifted up onto a cross. On another level, it means being lifted up as being exalted, a sign of God's glory, of death being turned into life. And there's also the sense of his being lifted up to heaven. But just as the Hebrew people can't be saved from the danger of the snakes—remember God doesn't take the snakes away—so too we cannot be saved without the humiliation of the cross. There is no exaltation without the crucifixion in John's gospel.

So this passage from Numbers is brought in to reinforce for John's community how God, in the past, had lifted up something to bring life to God's people.

¹ "In 2000 years of history, two forces - at times in conflict, at times complementary - have shaped the Catholic Church: the doctrine of love and the love of doctrine. Dom José Cardoso Sobrinho, archbishop of Olinda and Recife, undoubtedly represents the second force," - the opening sentence of a new article in *Veja* (Brazil's equivalent of *Time* or *Newsweek*).

http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/2009/03/quote-for-th-30.html

² Barbara Brown Taylor in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2.* (Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2008)page 103.

What God did through Moses lifting up the bronze serpent in the wilderness is just an opening act, compared to what God did by lifting up Jesus. Because in the lifting up, in the exaltation of Jesus, our death will be turned to life.

“Whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

John’s gospel, and this passage in particular, is often used to argue that our salvation largely rests on our choice. On our decision to choose Jesus. And that is a part of this passage. There is a sense in John’s gospel that we do need to respond to the truth that “God so loved the world that God gave the only son”. But our response to the grace that has saved us shouldn’t diminish the gift. The exaltation of Christ on the cross that turns into the glory of the resurrection should not be reduced to only being something in our possession. God didn’t so love just us. God so loved the WORLD. “Indeed”, we’re told in verse 17, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

So, we leave it to God to figure out how that saving works. And we get busy, after we decide to follow him, creating a community where God’s love is abundant and available for all.

In the next weeks and months, be looking for ways to participate in this community. On April 4th, we’ll be going to “meet the neighbors” again, letting our neighbors know that we want to be here for them and inviting them to join us. I hope you’ll come join us for that.

And in a few minutes, we’ll be commissioning Randy Marshall as a Commissioned Lay Pastor. He will be the Coordinator for Social Justice Ministries here, and will be inviting us to participate in all sorts of new things, largely focused around care of creation. And we’re adding to Carol Brunlinger’s job description as well, so be looking for more information about how to join in ministry with her in the months to come.

One thing that all of us can do to create a community where God’s love is available for all is in the welcoming presence we provide. As new people join us, it is nice to see you introducing yourselves to them. And I invite you to be on the lookout for visitors, introducing them to others, helping them figure out where the Coffee Fellowship is located, inviting them to participate in the life of the community. Even parking in the school lot to leave room in our lot for visitors is a way of making this community more welcoming.

Snakes on a Plain
Numbers 21:4-9

March 22, 2009
John 3:14-21

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Lent 4, Year B

We are mid way through this Lenten journey. As we continue this journey to the cross, to our salvation, to the transformation of death into life, let us look to share God's abundant love with the whole world. Amen.