

Lent 4B. March 11, 2018. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21. “Snakes and Salvation”

14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17“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. 18Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

(Children’s sermon relating to the Numbers text above.) “What would you do if YOU had a miraculous bronze serpent?” Carry it with you always!

Israel’s King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:4) burned the bronze serpent which the people had been carrying along with them, burning incense in front of, and worshiping. The young, faithful king burned the bronze serpent because people turned it into an idol. What was meant to heal, to lead to repentance and trust in God, the force for good outside oneself became a thing used like magic – perhaps without true repentance, the thing instead of God.

Perhaps he wanted to discourage the people from imitating neighboring communities who worshiped serpents. Eventually the Rod of Asclepius, a serpent entwined around a pole, became the symbol of medical arts. You may have seen it at your doctor’s office.

The young man – we’ll call him Asher -- entered the tent and saw his mother writhing in pain. “Amma,” he cried, “what is wrong?” Then he saw the snake slithering away. He lifted her up – Asher was still a strong, young man – and carried her, watching as she breathed more and more slowly, her face more and more swollen. He carried her to the center of the camp where some men were hanging a dull bronze form of a snake onto a pole. Moses was crying out, “look at the serpent and live.” Asher laid her down; she looked. She fell asleep and when she awoke, she was well.

Then Asher ran to the other tents of the camp. Come, you who are sick, look at the serpent and be healed. Some came and lived. Others stubbornly refused and died.

The ancient story of people far from home, people without much food or water, people complaining of the wilderness, was passed down from mouth to mouth for centuries, and finally written down when the people were again in difficult times far from home in exile. It’s a story for difficult times, times of brokenness, complaints, loss of community cohesion, conflict and insidious immoral behaviors that slither around and eventually bite.

Snakes are complex creatures. Most of us recoil when we see one even though we know one of the benefits of Western Washington woods is the absence of poisonous snakes. So, we reframe our thinking because the non-poisonous snakes we encounter here are really gifts; they eat slugs!

Ever since the snake story in the Garden of Eden, the snake has been associated with temptation, with evil, with lies, with deception. In this ancient story, we see a reframe of that association. An image of a snake becomes – in God’s mysterious way -- an image of healing.

In the story of the snakes biting the Israelites on their wilderness wandering, we hear that the people had been complaining. Easy to see why. They had been wandering for a very long time, taking what they knew to be anything but a straight line toward the Promised Land, eating strange crusty food found each morning on plants, desiring meat,

desiring more water, desiring a vegetable once in a while. They were losing faith in Moses, faith in their journey's goal, and faith in God.

It's easy to see how the complaining eroded the spirit of the people which God sought to mold into a cohesive community of faith. It is said that hanging out with people who complain all the time has a negative effect, even on those not doing the complaining.

You can see similar erosion of spirit in our nation when we look at political divides, scarce will for compromise, name-calling, spreading of poisonous lies and complaints. People today, like the people in Moses' day are losing faith in their leaders. People today, like the people in Moses' day, have in many cases lost faith in God. Witness the growing number of people claiming NO RELIGION.

In what for many are difficult times, where is the dull, bronze snake we can turn to and live?

Some of Moses' flock looked at the bronze snake and lived. Some refused and died. It took faith to look at that snake. It took willingness to name the problem. Ouch, I've been bitten! It took faith to ask someone to carry you to the center of camp, so you could look at the sign of healing, so you could name the fear, the brokenness, the sin which would lead to death from snakebite.

During Lent we are encouraged to name our fears and brokenness; to repent, to look to God, the agent of healing outside of ourselves; to gain life.

For the tellers and writers of the ancient story, the snakes symbolized the complainers, the faithless, the despairing – or at least the complaints, despair and misplaced faith. Looking to the bronze snake symbolized how God once again would mysteriously make good from evil as people refocused their affection and hope on the gift of healing that God sent through Moses.

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The Gospel writer John uses this image to explain the role of Jesus Christ to Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a ruler of the people. He had come by night to ask Jesus about the signs Jesus had been doing. Jesus tells him he must be born anew, which puts Nick off for a while. Then Jesus says, "...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." In other words, Jesus would be the one to whom the world would look for healing from brokenness, for life after fear and pain. The horror and pain of the cross would translate into hope and forgiveness.

Jesus WILL be lifted up on the cross and we will look to him in faith. This lifting up will be a sign that shows us God's love for the whole, complaining, broken world – which John's Greek calls the kosmos.

Why? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Note: the word ONLY, in God's ONLY Son, might better be translated, God's UNIQUE Son, God's one-of-a-kind Son. For we have all been called, in other parts of the Scriptures, God's sons and daughters. But our call is to follow the unique one, Jesus, our older brother.

We don't know how Nicodemus felt after hearing those famous John 3:16 words. Nothing more is said in Scripture until AFTER Jesus has been lifted up and has died. Nicodemus appears then, this time in the light of day, to claim Jesus' dead body and, along with Joseph of Arimathea, to give him a proper burial.

The story of Nicodemus can help us refrain from judging how others respond or don't respond to the story of Jesus. God's holying Spirit can continue to work in the lives of those who claim NO RELIGION or who refuse to look at the bronze serpent in the form of Jesus on the cross.

What keeps people, including people we love, from looking at the bronze serpent person on the cross? Perhaps it's despair, confusion, trust in one's own power of goodness or strength of will. Perhaps it's the difficulty of seeing God as different from us in that God would forgive rather than condemn. Perhaps it's the stubborn unwillingness to admit our need for such grace and forgiveness. Perhaps it's fear of rejection, or fear of change. In John 12:32 Jesus says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Will draw the poison out of people.

For these people and for ourselves we continue to pray. We pray that we bear witness to Christ's light in our own lives. We beg for insight and forgiveness, and for light when we stumble into the darkness.

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Today we are delighted to welcome eight new members into this community. May we together remain in the light, naming our sadness, our brokenness when we experience it – as individuals and as community -- and clinging to Christ's redeeming, loving, suffering work in the world and cherishing his on-going presence among us: Sunday after Sunday, year after year, members coming and going, pastors changing, through our personal and communal ups and downs, cares, prayers, hopes, and dreams.

When someone says, "Ouch! One of those poisonous serpents just bit me!" or "I have really messed up this time." Or "These are difficult times."

May we respond like Asher who carried his mother to the center of the ancient camp and then called out with words of hope to others. "Come, let me help you look at the bronze serpent on the pole and live!"  
"Come, let me help you look at Jesus Christ, the Son of God, on the cross. And live." Amen.