



“Snake on a Stick”

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John 3:14-21

As a city boy, I didn't come across very many snakes growing up. Sure, we might've seen the occasional garter snake or very large earth worm that we mistook for a snake, but snakes were something unusual and mostly absent from my life. When Amanda and I lived in Atlanta, it was a different story. Our house was by a wooded creek and there were rat snakes and brown snakes everywhere, but we let them live because they weren't poisonous and they thinned out the rodent population. So, for most of my life I thought snakes were rather nonthreatening creatures. And then... we moved to Texas. As many of you know, Amanda and the girls love to go hiking and explore nature. A couple of months ago they were hiking the Rowlett Creek trails when Beatrice screamed at the top of her lungs and forcefully jumped back, Exorcist-style. Of course, Amanda had taught the girls the right thing to do when encountering a snake, which is to freeze, and then back away silently and slowly. But when you actually see a snake in real life, every ounce of training goes out the window. Bea's first reaction to seeing a copperhead coiled in the middle of the trail wasn't to freeze and assess the snake's actions. It was to scream and jump back like she was being yanked by an unseen force. And I think her response is generally what most of us would do. Whether you are five or ninety-five, snakes are scary.

We are warned to defend ourselves and stay away from snakes. It is certainly an uncomfortable reality that there is even the slightest possibility that we might come across a poisonous snake. And because we have this aversion to snakes, when we think of serpents in the Bible, what do we usually think of? Well, my mind goes immediately to the snake in the Garden of Eden. That particular serpent is connected to Satan so it gives us the impression that snakes have been symbols of evil since the beginning of time. The snake in the Garden of Eden seemed to have the power of deception and temptation. It was crafty and cunning. It wanted to poison the lives of the new humanity, causing them to reject God and turn against one another. And like Indiana Jones, we too murmur under our breaths when we hear Jesus in today's text comparing himself to a snake, “Snakes... why'd it have to be snakes?”

For Jesus to compare himself to a snake is not an image that most of us would expect. And yet, in our scripture, we hear Jesus himself say, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” Jesus compares himself to a snake on a stick. This reference Jesus makes about a serpent on a pole brings us back to the book of Numbers when the people of Israel had escaped Pharaoh and their captivity in Egypt only to wander in the wilderness. They had become impatient with both God and Moses. They complained to Moses and to God that they had been brought out of Egypt only to die in the wilderness. They wanted to go back. They wanted to eat and live. They didn't seem to remember the misery of their enslavement, they remembered the food that they had back in the fleshpots of Egypt. They complained and grumbled and didn't trust Moses or God. There was no food and no water. And

so, God provided bread from heaven, manna. But the Hebrews complained even more. “Is this all that we are going to get, just manna? Manna for breakfast, manna for lunch, and manna for dinner. How many ways can you prepare manna? I’m tired of manna, I’m tired of wandering, and I’m tired of trusting in a God who isn’t saving us.” They murmured about manna, so God sent them a substitute, something else. God sent them serpents. One commentator says, “Obviously, God never attended a management seminar where they teach you how to listen to the customers. God’s response to customer complaints is to pull the manna off the menu and give them serpents.”

And so, the Lord sent poisonous snakes – poisonous serpents – among the people and many of the people were bit and dying from their poisonous bites. Eventually, the people came to Moses and confessed and repented of their grumbling against God. So then, Moses prayed for the people and the Lord instructed Moses to, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” The story continues by telling us that, “Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it on a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.”

And although we have misgivings about idols, and God’s anger, and the thought of poisonous snakes as punishment, I think the important aspect of this old tale is that God gives healing forgiveness. That is what the snake on a stick symbolizes, strange as it seems to us. It was a sign to the grumbling and frustrated and hopeless and desperate people that God would indeed forgive, and through that forgiveness, the healing of God’s people would come.

But snakes... why’d it have to be snakes? There are so many other images we can think of for Jesus that provide us comfort and gladness. For instance, Jesus is known as the Good Shepherd and we see that image portrayed with our Lord carrying a lost sheep gently upon his shoulders. He is known as the Bread of Life, feeding our souls. He is known as Living Water, making it so we don’t thirst anymore. He is known as the Light of the World, illuminating the dark and dreary places. He is known as the Way, guiding us to the promised places of God. Each of these images provides us with a sense of safety, shelter, and security. We don’t look at the humble and healing Jesus and want to scream at the top of our lungs and jump back out of fear. Yet, Jesus compared himself with a snake, a poisonous serpent, and that is a challenging part of our text today.

Referring to Jesus with the image of a serpent, Herbert O’Driscoll, Dean of New Westminster and a pastor and hymn writer said in *The Word Among Us*, “It depicts utter opposites – the serpent in the garden at the beginning of creation, and the serpent on the cross in an act of new creation. One seeks to manipulate and corrupt our human nature; the other, to free us and save our human nature. One appeals to our selfish desires; the other, to the very highest in us. One seduces, the other loves. One brings about our banishment from the presence of God; the other draws us into the presence of God. There is a host of rich meanings in this image of the two serpents – Satan, the serpent of temptation; Jesus, the serpent of salvation.”

So, this snake on a stick, this serpent of salvation calls us to recognize and gaze upon the forgiveness and the love of God. Jesus took an image of deception and fear and transformed it into salvation. Jesus took the pain of poison and turned it into a healing balm. Jesus took the

darkness of death and turned it into the light of life. Jesus took the negative image of the snake and turned it into a symbol to save the world.

Bishop John Smylie notices the transformation of the serpent into the savior. He says, “The serpent in the garden – so crafty, so deceptive, so about himself – is manifestly different than the one upon the cross who stretches out his arms that he might embrace the whole of creation. Jesus is lifted up and takes the sin of the world upon himself. Jesus takes the poison of our sinful existence upon himself so it is drawn from us, drawn out of us, that the sin which has poisoned our relationship with our God be removed from our existence each time we turn to the saving grace and salvation given to us through the sacrificial lifting up of Jesus Christ.”

But, it often seems that the first serpent has control of our lives, doesn't it? That the first serpent whispers in our ears, seeking to twist our natures to conform to those who are against God. The first serpent who wants us to figure it out on our own. The first serpent who pushes us to ignore God, hurt each other, and listen to the negativity and the lies. That first serpent who creates chaos. That first serpent who invites us to be selfish, and willful, and exclusive. The first serpent who separates us from God. But we have a second serpent, the serpent on a stick, the serpent of salvation lifted high on the cross who offers us healing and wholeness. The second serpent focuses our attention on the one who was lifted up for the salvation of all. The second serpent spreads out his arms widely on the cross in order to embrace all of creation and all people in his nail pierced hands. The second serpent overflows with forgiveness and brings healing to the world.

The bronze serpent that Moses held above the people inviting them to look upon it was an instrument of healing for those who sought after a loving and forgiving God. For the Hebrews to look upon the serpent was to receive redemption and life. Today, we too have something that we look towards, we have the savior on the cross, we have the wide arms of Jesus, we have the hope of the resurrection. When our lives are poisoned by the world, when disease has infested our bodies, when anger has plagued our souls, when greed has swarmed our spirits, and when the complaints and dissatisfaction and grumbling against God and God's people distract us from our journeys, we have one whom we can look upon for forgiveness and healing, one who is far greater than a statue of a serpent made of bronze. Jesus was lifted up so that the whole world might look upon him and see true forgiveness and love.

And this is why this familiar passage from John is so important for us today. John 3:16 tells us that God loves the world. Jesus being lifted up is a sign that God loves the world, the whole world. God does not simply love the part of the world that says the right words. God does not simply love the part of the world that prays the right prayers. God does not simply love the part of the world that sings the right hymns. God does not simply love the part of the world that looks toward Jesus Christ high and lifted up. No, God loves the whole world including the broken things of this world. God loves the world which is fragmented and frayed by misunderstandings and misinformation. God loves the world that is torn apart by violence and war. God loves the world that is diseased by anger and arrogance. God loves the world that continues to be poisoned by the first serpent. God loves the world, the whole world.

And this serpent of salvation, lifted up on the cross, reveals to us just how much God loves the world. And no matter where we are in our lives, no matter what hurts and pains are biting at our heels, no matter what poisons we have coursing through our veins, we can look to Jesus and find forgiveness and find love. “God’s love, you see, is tenacious,” writes David Lose, “And so God’s love will continue to chase after us, seeking to hold onto us and redeem us all the days of our lives, whether we like it or not. So maybe [John 3:16], if we took it more seriously, that might terrify us in how it renders us powerless in a world literally hell-bent on accumulating and exercising power. Then again, maybe as we remember God’s tenacious love we might also realize that, precisely because this is the one relationship in our lives over which we have no power, it is also the one relationship we cannot screw up. Because God created it, God maintains it, and God will bring it to a good end, all through the power of God’s vulnerable, sacrificial, and ever so tenacious love.”

May it be so.

Amen.