

*Living or Dying With Snakes!*

L-4B

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

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Message of Jesus and the serpent lifted up

Hospitality: Welcome

Relationship with God and each other

God's Hope: Resurrection power

**Numbers 21:4-9** <sup>4</sup> From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. <sup>5</sup> The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." <sup>6</sup> Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup> And the **LORD said to Moses,** "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a **serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole;** and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would **look at the serpent of bronze and live.**

**John 3:14-21** <sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, **so must the Son of Man be lifted up,** <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> "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.** <sup>17</sup> "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. <sup>18</sup> Those 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. <sup>19</sup> And this is the **judgment,** that the light has come into the world, and **people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.** <sup>20</sup> For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But 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."

Who really likes snakes? Snakes make me nervous. I would never qualify to be in a poisonous snake handling church! That's not the kind of way that I want to test my faith! But, today snakes are a part of our life whether we like it or not. Some are harmless and others are deadly. When we really want to **characterize** somebody that is a particularly troublesome person and who intentionally causes problems, we might call them a "*snake in the grass*." Recently, I was very concerned about the conduct and moral character of a certain politician. I mentioned this to a veteran of the legislative process; and he said, "Oh, he's just one of those snakes! There are about ten of them who are pretty deadly." That explains everything, right? They're just snakes.

Snakes – friend or foe? In the Bible stories of Exodus and the Gospel of John, a deadly snake is both a sign of judgment and death but also of hope and life. Jesus is compared to a snake on a bronze pole that Moses lifted up for the complaining Israelites to see. This **lifting up** is part of the imagery of the time when the Hebrew people were in their wilderness journey. They were once again complaining and murmuring which is a deadly thing to Moses and to God's hope for the people. So, God sends poisonous snakes to bite the troublesome people as a form of judgment. The Israelites often saw God sending both blessings and curses upon them.

Then, they got it. They went to Moses and confessed that they had been the source of the problem, not God. They admitted their sin to Moses and asked him to petition God for relief. Our passage in Numbers puts it this way, “<sup>8</sup> *And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.”* <sup>9</sup> *So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.”*

So, as the ancient story goes, when Moses petitioned God, the response was not as expected. God did not give an automatic magical cure to every sinful person within range of Moses’ staff. Instead, God required that a poisonous snake be place on a pole, a bronze copy, of course, and lifted up in full view of the people. It was then up to them to turn and look up to this new sign for healing. Each person in looking up to the elevated bronze snake replica that had been the source of their pain and death, now found the source of healing that God had provided them. Curse and death then becomes the very source of healing and hope.

Jesus is that same sign of hope to the world, where sin still brings death and pain and separation. **Nicodemus** who came to spy on Jesus in the dark and to find out what kind of person this man, Jesus, was, found himself full of riddles. Nicodemus was totally confused about the saying that one

had to be born anew or from above, not like in the womb of a mother. What did that mean? Jesus didn't make it any easier for him by saying that the Son of Man had to be lifted up to the world just as was done with a snake long ago for the ancient Hebrews in the wilderness time.

Today, if you go to the Holy Land and enter from the Jordan side, your guide will take you to that place known as **Mt. Nebo**. There, you can look out from the mount as Moses might have done so with his people long, long ago. He saw the Promised Land. He saw the desert around the Dead Sea in the south; and to the north he saw the lush green area of Jericho. This was the place of of hope and promise.

But what stands there on Mt. Nebo is this monument to the snakes! I have a picture of this statue with snakes on a pole in a cross like form.



The Christological Symbol (Brazen Serpent Sculpture), created by Italian artist, Giovanni Fantoni, stands atop Mount Nebo. It is symbolic of the

bronze serpent created by Moses in the wilderness (Numbers 21:4-9) and the cross upon which Jesus was crucified (John 3:14).



Note the images of cross and snake. Here is another picture with Moses



standing by the pole with the snake wrapped around it.

We are just as startled today with images of snakes and crucifixion images that imply both death and life. This is precisely our challenge on this fourth Sunday of Lent. What does it mean to become exposed to Christ on the cross. Certainly the most well known passage is the one that follows the lifting up of the serpent in the Gospel. It is the John 3:16 passage, which most of us know by memory. <sup>16</sup> *"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.***”

The key to unlocking this passage is that God loves the world, the whole world – the world from creation to now, including all persons, all nations, all races in all times past, present and future. God’s son is the sacrifice of love, suffering and dying on a cross, lifted up for us to see and to be drawn unto in order to come face to face with God as our source of healing and salvation.

This is first a message of welcome and invitation. God’s kingdom come on earth is not an exclusive club. As we look on, we believe in whom this Son of God came as a source of life that is real now and forever more. We are not extricated to some other planet. We are staying right here in the midst of a broken world as a sign that God’s healing for us is a hope for others also.

This is God’s hospitality of the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed as his central sermon and message: ***The kingdom of God has come near now, turn and believe and rejoice in this good news.*** This sanctuary is consecrated to this message’s intent. Strangers and estranged, enemies and friends, the lost and the suffering, all are invited to enter into worship and become part of a community of faith that makes life possible right now, this very moment.

We look up and we see the supreme sign before us – the Cross. Lent is our journey through the wilderness to this place of hope and salvation. Believing into Jesus means that we are surrendering our self trust to God trust. It means that we then have to follow Jesus and to become crossed with him. It means we will be living a different way and style of life.

Why does real life escape us today and instead give us so much discouragement and sadness? Where do we find life as God intends for us to live in peace with one another?

This is the life of God's love that is lifted up for us to see. This is love that gives up for another. This is love that will not end or quit when times get rough. This is love that suffers all things, endures all things, and hopes all things. This life does not promise that believers will not suffer. We cannot say as the ancient Israelites said and complained, "Why did you bring us out of slavery in Egypt and give us this desert only to die here?" In the old life of wilderness and deadly snakes, it is a life of negativity, bitterness, resentment, and complaining. This is a viral disease that infects and ultimately can kill the very soul of our being and our community.

Instead, God establishes a new relationship. This is the relationship with Christ as our savior who does not come to condemn us but to save us. This is a relationship that bears fruit in us to love and care for others and for

a redeemed world. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are the meek or those who have the strength to be gentle for we all shall inherit this blessing of the Kingdom of Heaven that comes near to us in our relationship with Christ.

This is the power of hope that comes on Easter morning. It is the power of resurrection. No power of snakes whose poison kill will ultimately destroy real life. This real life is a gift of grace from God. This is a gift that is lifted up before us to look upon and to believe into for ever and ever.

We have a choice today. We can look at our life as it is and say we don't need healing. We can delude ourselves with a self belief that we can do it all by ourselves. We can create whatever god we want. We can complain and lament our life as a fate that is beyond our control. We could choose to say that life is just a destiny that is set and out of our control. These choices leave out the possibility of God intervening, providing healing out of our hurt. This other way causes us to admit and to confess our own deadly roles in this world. This other way causes us to look up and see healing where we thought once was death. This is the power of God to transform death to life, hurt to hope and to give us a way to walk in light, not darkness. This is a new image to behold – **living and dying with**

snakes!

