

Fourth Sunday in Lent B
March 11, 2018

Grace Church, Lexington
Fr. James

Numbers 21:4-9 Psalm 107:1-3,17-22 Ephesians 2:1-10 John 3:14-21

SNAKE ON A POLE

“I don’t like snakes.”

“Nothing good ever came from a snake”

Moses erects the pole with the snake on it, a poisonous snake, that God had sent to punish the rebellion. How often rebellions come among human creatures. When the people begged Moses to pray for their deliverance from these serpents, he does and God instructs him to create a copper, more likely bronze snake and mount it on a standard where the people could see it. If bitten they could look on the snake and be healed. This is not a probably solution in Israel for they were forbidden to make images, and this one was in time worshipped so that King Hezekiah in II Kings 18 destroyed it to remove one temptation from the people.

I’ve long considered this snake on a pole on a pole to be the original *caduceus*, the medical symbol that stands in the medical lexicon for ‘doing no harm’ to patients.

When the bitten rebels gazed on this symbol they were healed of their fatal bite. So powerful was this story that Jesus repeated it in our Gospel comparing himself to that standard. Jesus said, “Just 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. The image of this deathly thing becomes for them life-giving. ‘So with me,’ said Jesus. This Gospel passage is amazing for what it contains.

Within it is John 3:16. Did you notice? It is probably the most memorized Gospel passage, but generally very few look at the words that surround it. Why is Jesus comparing himself to the seraph serpent in Numbers 21? But following 3:16, John goes on to say that God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn the world, but just by his coming light enters the world, that is, truth, goodness, love and anyone who does not accept that truth, that goodness, that love, this Jesus, will be judged condemned, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. When we look at the entire passage we realize that Jesus, loving though he may be, is not unlike the

death dealing snake. Rebellion leads to death even in the presence of God's Son. Is this unloving on the part of God? John suggests that it is rather unheeding on the part of the human beings who ignore God's loving grace. Under Moses he was providing them a way out of slavery. Those of us who have never experienced slavery have few means of understanding. We are heir to a fiction here in the South that 'our' slaves were happy to be slaves, to be dependent, to be taken care. I've heard that all my life. That, of course, ignores virtually every recorded word left on the subject by slaves when they were free of punishment for saying what they felt about it.

In Moses day, these slaves were willing to take any risk to be free until it threatened their comfort, their sense of well-being, their growing sense of independence. In our own day, being slaves to sin does not seem so bad. Until we long to be free of the sin which so easily besets us, we too may be counted among those who loved darkness rather than the light.

Believing is a slippery concept. I grew up near Niagara Falls. Many was the story of people going over the

Falls in a barrel. When there I would try to imagine such an idiotic thing. Very difficult. There were also stories of men who walked tight ropes over the Falls. I never saw one, but it is something I promised myself early I wasn't interested in. There was the French acrobat named Blondin, who was interested and did many feats at Niagara Falls.

“One day, Blondin's manager was standing on the Canadian side of the gorge, doing his best to attract a crowd for his acrobat to perform. Blondin had just done a series of stunts (walking on his hands, doing cartwheels, using a unicycle, etc.). His feats were really quite spectacular. The Frenchman took up a wheelbarrow and got onto the rope between the two sides and turned to his manager. In front of the crowd, he asked him, "Do you believe that I can push this wheelbarrow across this rope to the other side?" The manager said, "Yes, I do." Blondin said, "Get into the wheelbarrow!"

There is a profound difference between believing and believing. [David Chotka]

Believe on the Lord Jesus and live. 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—that is, not life after death, alone, but *kairos* life, life outside of time, life that need not count years, life not represented on a calendar or a clock, life that is generated and enjoyed with God now and evermore, hence always a present reality, life represented by climbing into that wheelbarrow.

There is a story that comes out of the Bedouin culture. "Bedouin" is the Aramaic name for "desert dwellers." These people live much as the characters of the Old Testament did. During a heated argument, according to this story, a young Bedouin struck and killed a friend of his. Knowing the ancient, inflexible customs of his people, the young man fled, running across the desert under the cover of darkness, seeking safety.

He went to the black tent of the tribal chief in order to seek his protection. The old chief took the young Arab in. The chief assured him that he would be safe until the matter could be settled legally.

The next day, the young man's pursuers arrived, demanding the murderer be turned over to them. They would see that justice would prevail in their own way. "But I have given my word," protested the chief.

"But you don't know whom he killed!" they countered.

"I have given my word," the chief repeated.

"He killed your son!" one of them blurted out. The chief was deeply and visibly shaken with his news. He stood speechless with his head bowed for a long time. The accused and the accusers as well as curious onlookers waited breathlessly. What would happen to the young man? Finally the old man raised his head. "Then he shall become my son," he informed them, "and everything I have will one day be his."

The young man certainly didn't deserve such generosity. And that, of course, is the point. Love in its purest form is beyond comprehension. No one can merit it. It is freely given. It is agape, the love of God. Look to the cross. At the cross we encounter love in its purest form.

Paul wrestled with this in his Epistle. He acknowledged that the Ephesians had been part of those who followed the evil one, who followed the desires of flesh and senses, who had not the Christ at the center of their lives, but essentially themselves. God, rich in mercy, out of great love made us alive together with Christ. By grace we were saved through faith, not our own doing, but by God's simple gift. We didn't earn it by good works. To the contrary, and this is one of those subtle, but incredibly important distinctions—like the agent believing that Blondin could cross a rope over Niagara Falls pushing a wheelbarrow—God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works. That is, we don't do good works to have God's love, we, because we have God and enjoy his love want to do good things. It issues from us freely like water from a rushing stream. I ask myself, is that true of me? That takes transformation.

Anthony Campolo tells about a mountaineer from West Virginia who fell in love with the beautiful daughter of the town preacher. The gruff and tough man one evening looked

deeply into the eyes of the preacher's daughter and said, "I love you." It took more courage for him to say those simple words that he had ever had to muster for anything else he had ever done. Minutes passed in silence and then the preacher's daughter said, "I love you, too." The tough mountaineer said nothing except, "Good night." I guess he thought there had been enough words spoken. Then he went home, got ready for bed and prayed, "God, I ain't got nothin' against nobody."

When God's love so enters us that we can experience that, and know that, then the center of our life has changed, Jesus hanging on a standard, a cross, will have made personal sense to us, and we will know *kairos* life, eternal life, God's life. *So be it.*