

## **Snake on a Stick    Number 21:4-9    John 3:14-21**

Our reading from the Book of Numbers is one of the most interesting ancient parts of our scriptures. Moses and the people are going through the desert, and they come upon poisonous snakes and suffer casualties. Like most theologians writing at the time, the author of The Book of Numbers assumes that everything that happens is by direct intervention of God. And so when the wandering people following Moses stumble on poisonous snakes, the writer thinks God put them there. And so it follows that since God is good, then God must have put them there as a deserved punishment. So the snakes are explained as God's direct response to the people complaining and showing lack of faith in God and Moses - "Why did you bring us out into the desert," they are quoted as saying, "do you want us to starve?!" And so the writer states that the snakes are God's chastening rods sent to shape up the people.

I am not a biologist, but I am guessing the poisonous snakes were in the desert before the people arrived. I have watched enough old Western movies to know there are poisonous snakes in the Western deserts of this continent so why not the Middle East? And though the people were probably complaining, at least some, the snakes are there not as a result of their complaints, but rather because snakes live in the desert. But I understand the writer's desire to make everything happen for a reason. We humans want a logical explanation – particularly when bad things happen. But that desire does not mean bad things happen for some good reason. We have free will in this world, and not only us, but the animals, the weather.. viruses. Though we want God to be in control of everything, I do not think God has any interest in that. I think God made this wonderful universe to grow and change – and thus God gave it the capacity to create and evolve and sometimes in that wild freedom things happen which are bad.

That does not mean God is not intimately involved in every single thing. And it certainly doesn't mean God doesn't love and care about what happens. When the well-known UCC Preacher William Sloan Coffin lost his son in a terrible car accident he was often asked where God was when the car went into the water, Coffin replied, "God was

in the car with my son, and God's heart was the first to break at his death." God cares what happens, and God can influence what happens, but God does not make bad things happen. Many said Hurricane Katrina was punishment from God for many different sins of many different groups. Pat Robertson said it was because Ellen DiGeneres – an openly Lesbian woman – was picked to host the Oscars. Well they were all wrong, just plain wrong. That is not how God works. When humans decide to build a huge city in a flood plain on a coast that regularly gets hurricanes, and when other humans choose to build faulty levies to protect the poor areas of the city and still other humans decide that though the levies were vulnerable that there was no money to reinforce them, and when all of us continue to pour pollutants into the air and are surprised the climate is getting a little wild... you get my point, it is ridiculous to pin any event on God at all. The question of why bad things happen is much more complicated than just deciding God makes everything happen.

But the amazing thing about God is that God can take a bad situation and make good come out of it. As God's people faced the death of some on their journey, God provides a means of healing, even in that bad situation. God commands a bronze snake be put on a branch and whoever looks at it, will recover from a snake bite. Wow. This story is so powerful that the American Medical Association – the AMA has had it as their logo for a long time. (Picture) One of God's beautiful ironies is that the people have to look at the very thing that they fear... they have to face the very thing that will cause them to die, and facing it will give them the power to live. This power of the snake to give life seems to reverse the Eden event when the serpent as "the tempter" causes death to come into human experience.

This ancient story is so powerful that the writer of the Gospel of John uses this image to explain the death of Jesus on the cross. I like the way the Message Translation says it: "In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a

real life, eternal life.” In some ways this imaging is a very different interpretation of the cross than we usually hear. John does not talking about sacrifice or forgiveness in Jesus blood – this is a much later interpretation. Instead, John compares Jesus’ cruel death on the cross to the snake on the stick. When we look at the cross and see death's power we, like the people of Israel looking up at the snake, have to look at the thing we fear most - death. But we also remember that Good Friday is not the end of the story, that death does not have the final word.. Jesus; after being betrayed by his disciples; abandoned by his people; tried and tortured and seemingly destroyed by the Romans on this cruel instrument of death; comes alive again on Easter morning. If we look at Christ with eyes of faith we realize that in overcoming death for us he has the power to free us from all fears. Like the snake on the stick, Christ heals us from death itself. We know the cross was a horrific road for Jesus to travel.. how he asked that he not have to do it, but was willing if it was necessary. And Jesus' deep faith in the Creator of Life gave him to courage to face and ultimately overcome death on behalf of us.

Faith in the Christ and in God’s free flowing love can heal us from the ways we fail to live life. It heals us from clutching at or clinging to material things. It can give us the power of break the chains of addiction – no matter what is at the base of our disease. It can free us from bad habits, from timidity caused by the fear of death or its smaller fears, of want, or being humiliated. This is the power of Faith.

This is the power I saw this week as Congressman John Louis told about walking as a young man with Rev. King and so many others on the march to Selma. He explained why he stuck his hands in his pockets as he was beaten on his head. "That is what we were trained to do as non-violent resisters." The power to carry that out is rooted in the knowledge that know that Christ overcomes death on the cross.

Some have criticized Christianity for having as its symbol an instrument of cruel political execution. But we do not worship the cross – We worship the Christ who overcame the cross – among the cruelest forms of death every imagined. The Son of Man would not be destroyed even though the powers of oppression and hate and hell did

their worst. O death where is thy sting, O grave where is thy victory. We claim the cross defiantly because fear no longer controls us when we are steeped in faith. Oh, we are not without fear, it comes.. it came for the Selma marchers, it came for Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, but it did not stop him from doing what needed to be done.

The cross is proof of Love's power to overcome fear and hate and injustice and death itself. The Message says it this way: "This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again."

This is why we have the empty cross as a symbol. Jesus is alive and well even having gone through death on that cross. His power is the power we need to live lives free from fear. For if we need not fear death, then we can be free of being controlled by our fears. As we approach Holy Week, let us be willing to look at the cross. Let us keep our eyes open and our ears sharp to take in the story of betrayal, hatred, fear and torture. For in understanding the depth of it's horror, we understand the wonder of Christ's triumph on Easter. And we, like the people in dessert gazing on the bronze snake, can be healed to live lives of true joy and courage. AMEN

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

John 3:14-21 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. "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. "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. 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. & this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, & people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light & do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 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."