

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent     Snakes, Sin, and Salvation

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*From Mount Hor the Israelites set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 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." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 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. 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." 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.     Numbers 21:4-9*

*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. "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. 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. For all who do evil hate the light and 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."*

*John 3:14-21*

The fourth Sunday in Lent is Laetare Sunday or Refreshment Sunday. Laetare is the Latin word for rejoice, and this Sunday is like a halftime or an intermission in the long and somber season of Lent. It's a time to stand up and stretch legs that have become achy from kneeling in prayer. But after hearing today's scripture, some of us might want to stand up and run away, because it's also Snake Sunday! As my grandfather used to say, be careful of Mr. No Shoulders! There are some people who love snakes, and many who are very afraid of them.

In both the ancient and modern world, snakes have been known to be symbols of our deepest fears. They can also symbolize life, healing, and protection. Psychologists have associated dreams about snakes with a time of transformation and new beginnings, and the shedding of the snake's skin was viewed as a symbol of rebirth and renewal. It's the very venom of the snake that is used to make the healing antivenom for a snake bite.

From the beginning of creation, the snake became the symbol for temptation, the temptation to sin. It reminded God's people of all that was lost when they were cast out of the Garden of Eden. A snake reminded them of their sin, of their human desire to be like God. We don't really like being reminded of our sin, and so we attempt to cover it up, ignore it, or downplay it. This leads only to embarrassment, fear, guilt, or blame. Yet even when our sin strains our relationship with God, God never abandons us but constantly seeks to restore relationship.

As humans we fall to temptation. We sin. The people of Israel knew the creation story by heart. They knew all about temptation and sin as they wandered through the desert with resentment in their hearts. They grumbled and complained against Moses and God about their dissatisfaction. First, they said there was nothing to eat or drink, and then they admitted that they actually did have food, it was just that they detested it. They were no longer thankful for God's provision of manna and for water from the rock in the middle of the desert. They were not grateful that they had been delivered from a life of slavery in Egypt. Their selective memory was a temptation to sin.

The Israelites were spending all their time and energy focusing on the negatives of exodus life, and those serpents at their heels, and it was literally killing them. They had taken their eyes off of God to complain and had fallen into temptation and sin. In desperation they begged Moses to ask God to take away the serpents. So, God had Moses make a bronze serpent and attach it to a pole. The people were instructed to look up at the serpent, whenever they were bitten, and they would live.

We find ourselves in this place from time to time unsatisfied, grumbling, complaining, forgetting to be thankful for God's provisions. We are so focused on our discontent, on those things from which we need healing, such as greed, hatred, fear, or apathy, both in our individual lives and in our collective society, that we cannot see the antidote for our sin before us.

Even now we are in need of physical healing and the new vaccines are a healing gift to us from God, yet many of us are impatient and grumbling and not trusting in God's provision. Vaccines, like snake antivenom, are made from the poison, from components of the disease itself. In the same way that a disease can be transformed into a vaccine to prevent the disease, our acknowledgment of sin can become a cure for sin.

Notice that the Israelites turned to God and confessed their sin. There is healing in confession, there is healing in looking straight into our wrongful behaviors and seeing them as they are, seeing ourselves as we really are.

In the verses preceding our assigned gospel reading, Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus at night. Perhaps we are like Nicodemus knowing that somehow, we are in need of something from Jesus. Maybe we want to know more about what new life could be like. Maybe there is sin that is a darkness in our lives that we long to confess. Maybe we are ready to live in the light of Christ.

The Rite of Reconciliation is a healing gift that is offered by the Church. Through the centuries faithful people have found newness of life through confessing sins to God alone, or with the confidential assistance of a pastor. The Israelites gazed upon the bronze serpent and were healed. As we gaze upon our sins, that is, those misdeeds and behaviors that are harming us and causing us pain, confessing them before God, we will be forgiven and healed. We will shed the old skins of sin and be renewed.

The good news of the Gospel is that God has taken on our diseases and poisons. God has taken our sin upon God's self in order to become the antidote. In seeing Jesus on the cross, we are reminded of the sins of humanity, including our own. Seeing the empty cross, we are reminded of the forgiveness and healing we received when Christ was lifted up, the antidote for our sin.

God told the Israelites to lift up their eyes to God and look at the very thing they feared most. Jesus invited Nicodemus to lift up his heart to God and believe that new life was waiting for him. What might God be inviting us to look at in our own lives? What might we see in the context of the larger community that is in need of healing? Will we gaze upon these things, will we confess our part in them, and then lift up our hearts to God to receive the forgiveness, love and new life that awaits us? Amen.