

4 Lent, Year B Numbers 21:4-9 John 3:14-21
Christ and Grace March 11, 2018
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So, we managed to set our clocks ahead last night and we have faithfully struggled in here this morning after losing an hour of sleep, only to find a church full of serpents. After hearing our readings, I imagine you are all awake now, especially if you suffer from ophidiophobia.

Ophidiophobia is the fear of snakes. When my son was growing up he developed a great fascination for reptiles. What he wanted more than anything was a pet snake. Now I don't suffer from ophidiophobia but I do like my snakes to stay outside! Wanting to be a good mother and to encourage my son's scientific interests, I redirected his thinking and told him I would only allow reptiles *with legs* to enter our house. And so began a long line of assorted lizards and geckos along with the requisite container of live crickets to feed these reptiles. But I did manage to make sure there were no snakes slithering inside the house!

What is it about snakes that bothers so many of us? In the classic film "Raiders of the Lost Ark", Indiana Jones also suffers from ophidiophobia. On his trek to locate the Ark of the Covenant, he finds himself at the Well of Souls. As he peers down into the well, knowing he must enter it to continue on his quest, he sees, by the light of his torch, that the floor is moving. He hands a torch to Marion and tells her to wave it at anything that slithers, to which Marion replies, "The whole place is slitherin'!"

We seem to have a primal fear of snakes, though snakes have always been a reality of life. Serpents slither through scripture as well! The serpent first appears in the book of Genesis¹, tempting Adam and Eve to look to their own satisfaction rather than to God's good intention for their lives. In Exodus² Moses turned his staff into a serpent and then back into a staff as a sign of God's power. Then serpents appear in the book of Numbers, which we just heard, as God sent poisonous serpents among the people. In Matthew³ Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees a brood of vipers. In Mark⁴, when he commissioned the disciples, Jesus said that those who believe will handle serpents and not be hurt. In Luke⁵, Jesus gave the authority to tread on serpents to the Seventy he sent out on mission. And in our Gospel from John today, Jesus refers back to the event in Numbers – "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."

What is going on in the Numbers passage? The Israelites have become impatient in the wilderness and they are grumbling yet again about what they don't have. They claim they have *no* food and *no* water, but obviously they do have something to eat because they then say that they detest this miserable food! They are no longer thankful for God's provision of manna, and are spending all their time and energy focusing on the negatives of life, and those serpents at

¹ Genesis 3:1

² Exodus 7:10

³ Matthew 23:33

⁴ Mark 16:18

⁵ Luke 10:19

their heels, and it is literally killing them. They have taken their eyes off of Yahweh as they battle the serpents. And it's not working. In desperation they beg Moses to ask God to take away the serpents. So God had Moses craft a serpent out of bronze and attach it to a pole. The people were instructed to look up at the serpent, *whenever they were bitten*, and they would live.

Take note that this doesn't mean that they were not bitten or that the serpents went away, but simply that those who looked up and not down, did not *die* of their wounds. In their distress, they realized that what might kill them could also give them life. And we know that an extract of poison from a snake does provide the antidote for a potentially deadly bite. I am reminded of the saying that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger, a saying that is always easier to hear, and know to be true, only after we have gotten beyond the snake pit.

At some point we will all have serpents biting at our heels. What are some of the serpents in our lives, those poisonous temptations or uncontrollable circumstances that take our eyes off of God? Perhaps we are chased by the serpents of greed, anger, or inability to forgive. Maybe the serpents are nothing we asked for – a divorce, loss of a loved one, addiction or unemployment.

As we find ourselves about half way along on our Lenten path, what serpents do we see? Are there places of brokenness we are living with that might hold a particular invitation for us in this season? How do we keep our eyes and hearts open for the healing and life that Christ brings, often in unexpected ways?

The circumstances of our lives sometimes lead us into tempting places, where all we can see is the sinful way. John's Gospel calls it darkness, and when we are in the dark it can look like the only way. And so, we may blame the circumstances, blame others, or blame the serpents from our past.

To find healing the Israelites had to admit they had been focusing only on the serpents in their lives. Healing required an act of repentance or turning. They had to turn their eyes away from the poisonous serpents and toward the God who had cared for them through the wilderness journey.

In John's Gospel, Jesus used this story to describe the healing work he had come to do. "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." Jesus became flesh that he might bring light into our darkness, and healing from the venomous events of life. Jesus became flesh to show us the way to our salvation. "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."

The light of Christ, shining like a torch in our lives, allows us to see the serpents that slither around us. Some of our hardest experiences, and our deepest wounds can become places where we begin to learn how to fully depend on Christ's strength and compassion. The light of Christ shines in the darkness of any painful experience if we will simply look up to God and trust in God's power and healing love. Only then can what harms us be transformed into the very thing that heals us. Jesus, the Savior and Redeemer of the world brings us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life. Amen.