

“Lifting Up Snakes and God’s Son”

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(Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-21)
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Our story today is a slithering mass of fiery, nasty snakes – in the manna baskets, in the cook pots, in the blankets. With Indiana Jones, I cry, “Snakes. Why’d it have to be snakes?”^[1] And I’m not convinced when Indy says, “Just remember, they are more scared of us than we are of them.” Not in our story.

The snake story is a traveling story – a story that lives forever in the memory of a people. I have tracked this story through 3 tellings in the Bible: Numbers, II Kings, and John 3.

The First Telling of the Story: Begin with the puzzle of God sending fiery flying snakes and then putting a snake on a stick for salvation? Is this a misplaced story from pagan mystery religion? Perhaps, but there are Christian readings just as bizarre.^[2] In the nave of the basilica of Ambrose in Milan, there’s a 10th century Byzantine bronze serpent sculpture. Legend has that it was a wedding gift from Archbishop Arnulf II, around 1000 A.D., for Princess Stephania and Emperor Otto III. When the Archbishop arrived the emperor was dead and Arnulf placed the bronze serpent in the basilica where it remains today. Legend has it, that on the Day of Judgment, the snake will come to life, and announce the end of time. Then it will slither back to Josafat Valley, where it was formed by Moses, leading all humankind to final judgment. Snakes are the stuff of legend. Ask Medusa – the snake-headed former beauty of Greek mythology. As I read, I half expected Harry Potter’s patronus (“stag”) to appear.^[3]

As interesting as mythology and legend can be, let’s ground this story in our biblical memory. The Numbers passage speaks of snakes, sin, and death, and we understand because we have heard this story before. This is not our first run-in with snakes. Adam and Eve tangled with a snake in the Garden. As Indy says, “Snakes? I hate snakes.”

Now add the fact that the Hebrew word for fiery serpents is SERAPH. We get the word seraphim from this Hebrew word. Remember the seraphim? They were angels with six wings above the throne of God.^[4] And here in Numbers, or so the story goes, they are angels transformed into fiery flying snakes. Animal magicians? No. Angels.

The snakes appear at the end of a series of “murmuring” stories. God sends the snakes, so the story goes, as judgment on the murmuring of the Israelites. God told Moses to take a brass vessel from the door of the tent of meeting and beat it into an image of the serpents that were attacking the people. Moses made the bronze snake and wound it around his rod, running through the camp, holding the rod up high and calling out, “Look up! Look up and be saved!” Look up and live!”

Note that the serpent hammered out by Moses came from the door of the tent of meeting – the symbol of God’s presence. And the rod of Moses symbolized God’s power over the power of Egypt. So the symbols are those of God and of God’s power. Look up and live!

Now, the Bible says that those who stopped looking down at the snakes, and instead looked up at the brass snake, did not die. God has Moses lift high a symbol of ugliness and death to bring about new life. Remember this because we will return to this idea.

Perhaps the story should be read as judgment on our RESTLESS DRIVE FOR MORE. Murmuring is the particular name given to the unfaithfulness of Israel. They have “snakes in the head” – an image of anxiety and insecurity.^[5] I believe the snakes are attracted to the sound of murmurmurmuring.

Listen to the children of Israel murmur: No food to eat. And yet we know from the story that can't be right. God fed them manna. God fed the children of Israel manna three times a day for forty years. That's 43,810 meals – that's a lot of manna. Bubba, of Forest Gump fame, would say, we got manna pancakes, manna soufflé, manna fritters, manna muffins, manna soup, manna Stroganoff, manna with shrimp, manna with lump crab meat, baked, broiled, blackened, or fricasseed manna. Listen, these people had food.

Listen to the children murmur: No water. But that can't be true. God provided them water from a rock in the desert. That water in our world would be sold for more than Evian. Listen, these people had water to drink.

Listen to the children murmur: They said things like, “Moses preaches too long on the Sabbath.” “We hate this music.” No they didn't say that. But they did say, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” “Back to Egypt” became the cry. The “Back to Egypt” committee exists in every church. There's always a group of people who are opposed to any kind of change.

We can murmur or we can possess the spirit of Paul: “I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”^[6] Do you have an inner peace and contentment or is your head full of murmuring snakes? I'm not saying that is the only interpretation, but it is a way of reading the text.

What if the story reminds us of our greatest fears? After all, 22% of men and 49% of women surveyed say they are afraid of snakes. Fear of snakes is listed as the 3rd largest fear, right behind fear of speaking in public and fear of dying. So if this story is about fear, we can understand. One way to heal our fears is to get them out of the dark recesses of our minds. If we can place our worst fear on a stick in the sunlight, we can be saved from that fear.

Folks **are** scared. We are afraid that our god – Money – in whom we move and have our being and trust is going to desert us. Fear can cause us to scapegoat others as we are doing with the current flogging of AIG executives. Guess who said the following? We have a lot of “private bankers who ought to come out in the open and let folks see what they're doing.” 1930's Southern demagogue and senator from Mississippi Theodor G. Bilbo. Our investments are disappearing faster than we can count and somebody has to pay. Fear does strange things to people. I'm not saying that is the only interpretation, but it is a way of reading the text.

The Second Telling of the Story: When Israel journeyed from the place where the fiery snakes appeared, they packed up the bronzed serpent on a stick and took it with them. And then one day in the time of King Hezekiah, 500 years later, the bronze snake story shows up for a second time, and has now acquired a name: Nehushtan. “Unfortunately, like so many

objects first designed to help people become aware of God's presence around them, the brass snake began to be worshiped as an idol."^[7] So Hezekiah, a king who "did what was right in the sight of the Lord," during spring cleaning of the Temple, "broke in pieces the bronze serpent Moses had made."^[8]

THE BRONZE SNAKE ON A STICK WAS NEVER INTENDED TO BE A GOD. But see the snake slither into the very house of God. This can be the danger of symbols and metaphors. What are the "bronze serpents" in the church today? We can make an idol out of the Bible, our endowment fund, or this church building." The first Sunday I did communion I reached to take the top from the bread tray. A deacon glared at me and said, "Don't touch that." Once I decided to cut down a particularly unattractive scrub oak tree in the parsonage yard. The parsonage was next door to the church. Before I started the chain saw, I checked with the chairperson of the deacons and he told me that the tree had been planted years before in memory of WWII veterans. The tree stayed, but if I hadn't asked I wouldn't have been able to stay. ASK BEFORE TOUCHING! There's not a practice or doctrine that some Christian can't take and make of it a god.

The Third Telling of the Story: And that's the last of the snake for a thousand years until the writer of John's gospel gives the story a third life: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up." In John's re-telling of the story we discover a deeper answer for our deepest fears: LOVE. The story is more about love than snakes. John 3:16 is certainly more comforting than a den of snakes. In John 3:16, a verse that pops up everywhere in our culture, even tattooed on the head of a big bald guy, God says, "I love you." God says, "I give you my heart." Giving your heart is dangerous. It is an act of total vulnerability. Say, "I love you" to someone and the other person can receive it, nurture it, and give their equally fragile heart to you. That's a good thing. But the other person can also drop your heart and shatter it into a million little pieces. And many of us bear the scars of love that died or disappeared. In the movie *Good Will Hunting*, "That's great Will, keep it up, that way you can go through your entire life fully alone without ever giving your heart to anybody." God takes the risk and says, "I love you so much."

In John's telling of the story, the bronze snake has recovered its metaphorical and symbolic power as a figure of redemption. Just like that we are back to the idea that a symbol of ugliness and death can be the means of our salvation. Do you hear the echoes of Isaiah 52: "So marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, he shall startle many nations; kings shut their mouths because of him."

John takes the old story and uses it to make a specific claim: the snake on a stick and Jesus on a cross are both means of salvation – means to health and life. And both point the way to God. No wonder the early church not only called Jesus the good shepherd, but also knew him as the good serpent. The cross is a sacrament – an outward sign of an inward and spiritual grace. In front of the Franciscan friary that marks the traditional site of Mt. Nebo, where Moses viewed the Promised Land he would never enter, and where he died, stands a tall hammered metal sculpture by Giovanni Fantoni. It depicts Moses' snake on a stick and it also evokes the cross of Christ.

We always have a choice: the choice of satisfaction and contentment or the lust for more; the fear choice or the growth choice; look to Jesus or look away.

Satisfy our thirst and hunger for more with a trust in God for daily bread and life? Subdue our greatest fears and replace them with love for God and one another? Keep us from

misreading the data and worshipping objects, symbols instead of the living God? Look to Jesus for wholeness and life and love? What's your reading? Amen.

[1] Indiana Jones. *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, 1981.

[2] An old story tells that the famous Bronze Serpent was brought from Constantinople to Milan by Archbishop Arnulf II around 1000 A.D. as a wedding present for the solemn marriage between princess Stephania and Emperor Otto III, together with other precious things. However, when the ship with the Archbishop and the bride docked in Italy, the Emperor was dead, and the wedding present remained in Arnulf's possession. He decided to put the precious relic on the top of a Roman marble column inside the famous Basilica of St. Ambrose, in Milan, where it can still be seen. A legend tells that, on the day of the Judgement, the snake will take life, and will announce the end of the time. Then it will slither back to Josafat valley where Moses once forged it, leading the whole Humankind to its final judgement.

[3] "A Patronus is a kind of positive force, and for the wizard who can conjure one, it works something like a shield, with the Dementor feeding on it, rather than him. In order for it to work, you need to think of a memory. Not just any memory, a very happy memory, a very powerful memory... Allow it to fill you up...lose yourself in it...then speak the incantation 'Expecto Patronum'." —[Remus Lupin](#) teaching [Harry Potter](#) the Patronus Charm.

[4] Isaiah 6:1-6.

[5] Urban Dictionary: crazy or full of issues or baggage. People will describe their anxiety as having a head full of snakes. The Medusa was the daughter of Phorkys and Keto, the children of Gaia (Earth) and Okeanos (Ocean). She was one of the three sisters known as the Gorgons. The other two sisters were Sthenno and Euryale. Medusa was the only mortal out of the three. She was once very beautiful and lived far in the north where the sun didn't visit. Being very curious, she wanted to see the sun, and asked the Goddess Athena for permission to visit the south. Athena refused to allow her to visit. The medusa got angry and dared to say that Athena hadn't given her permission because she was jealous of her beauty. That was it! Athena was angered and punished her by turning her hair into snakes and cursing her by making her so ugly that who ever looked at her eyes would turn into stone.

[6]Philippians 4:11b-14.

[7] Lisa Caine, "The Good Serpent." Sermon preached on June 8, 2008 at Oconee Street United Methodist Church, Athens, Georgia.

[8] 2 Kings 18:4