

Poisonous Snakes

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 10, 2024

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

Sermon text: 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. John 3:14-15

In the classic movie, *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Indy, peering down into an ancient tomb uncovered in the desert, drops a torch into the darkness; it illuminates a mass of writhing snakes covering the floor below. “Snakes...why did it have to be snakes?” (see clip [here](#)).

Well, the Israelites, traveling with the original Ark of the Covenant, find themselves in the desert also desperate to escape a sudden swarm of poisonous snakes.

They seem to have appeared out of nowhere—seemingly in response to their complaining: We have no food or water. Not true, Moses has managed to secure some water by striking the rocks with his powerful staff. God has provided a miraculous food, manna, a thin flaky substance that appears as crystallized dew in the morning—you can gather only enough for the day. The people are sick of it; they remember the fleshpots of Egypt, the onion and leeks—conveniently forgetting they were also enslaved, being worked to death to build the pyramids that Spielberg’s hero would mythically explore.

In the book of Numbers they have escaped Egypt, received the Torah on Mt Sinai, built the portable Tabernacle and set off on the road to the promised land. But they find their way blocked by the army of the Edomites—they will have to go the long way around. They are tired, hungry, cranky. They complain. But although they are acting like spoiled children, perhaps they are only being human. So why the snakes?

Why did it have to be snakes?

Let us examine the spiritual meaning of this strange story. Gregory of Nyssa (332-395), one of the Cappadocian Fathers (brother to Basil the Great and his sister Macrina, teacher of them all) wrote a mystical interpretation of the *Life of Moses* around 390, when he was in his last decade of life. He writes of this episode that “unruly desires”—the passions of the flesh, appetites—brought forth the deadly serpents from the earth, “for every offspring of evil desire is a serpent.”

So the mystical or spiritual interpretation is that snakes are passions, appetites, unleashed when we are ungrateful and rebellious—and poisonous when unchecked or evil.

This allegorical reading has a lineage going back at least to Plato. The great philosopher described the tripartite human soul as composed of reason—pictured as a human; will—pictured as a lion; and appetite or passion—pictured as a hydra, the many-headed snake in Greek mythology whose heads grew again as they were cut off, killed by [Hercules](#) as the second of his Labors.

In Plato's telling, the preferred relationship of these parts of the self is for reason to control the will which controls the passions. But of course other orders are possible: when will—such as the will to power or relentless ambition, willing to do whatever it takes to “succeed”—controls both reason and passion and a sort of monster of tyranny or callousness is produced; or when appetites overcome both will and reason—well we know what that looks like—as I think we all can admit is us at least some of the time.

So in our story unreasonable appetites and ungrateful hearts have unleashed poisonous serpents harmful to the health of the individuals and the collective. The people realize things have gone wrong; many are dying; and they appeal to Moses to help them. They admit “we have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.”

Admitting you have sinned and praying to God for help— solid Lenten first steps on the road to recovery.

Moses prays on the behalf of his people—and not the first time, for he also intervened to save them from the wrath of God after they made a golden calf while he was on the mountain—and God provides a symbolic cure.

A bronze image of the poisonous serpent is made and lifted up on a pole so that those who have been bitten can look on it and be healed.

This suggests that if you hide from the truth you will not only remain in bondage to sin, you will die, your relationships will be poisoned, and you will be further than ever from God and neighbor. But if you bring out the poisonous snakes into the light, look at them, call them by their true names and pray for help, you will begin to be healed.

But there is more to be done. John the Evangelist uses this story of the healing snake lifted on the pole and applies it to Jesus lifted on the cross.

Here again, God is merciful and sends help—in the form of the one who descended from heaven, to take on the form of a human, to dwell among us and lead us, and who even took upon himself our sins, who was crucified by us and yet for us, forgiving—loving—even on the cross. So that when we look upon the one lifted up we may also be healed. We may be saved.

And so God did not send his only begotten Son to condemn the world but to save it.

But it takes our trusting response—we have to be willing to step out of the darkness, to confess our sins. As John writes elsewhere, if we say we have no sin there is no truth in us but if we confess our sins, God who is merciful and just will forgive our sins...

And this is the judgment, according to the gospel of John, that light has come into the world but some people prefer to remain in darkness—in the cave, as Plato also teaches. At least there, in the dim shadows where sin is hidden, you can pretend you are good and safe and maybe even better than those self-confessed sinners gathered around a cross on which hangs a dying criminal. What kind of crazy is that, they think.

But you know the truth deep within, in what Matthew calls the secret room—your spiritual heart—where Jesus invites you to pray with him and the Father, where the Spirit can enter with her healing wind and her breath of life. Where you can be renewed as on eagle's wings. Where you can finally come out into the light—blinking, perhaps aware of the pain of sins you had preferred not to acknowledge—but free from bondage to them.

Bring your shadow self into the light. Have courage and believe in God, trust in Christ, and you will be healed, slowly perhaps and not without pain, but the poisons of sin and self-deception will be sucked out. The serpents of desire will still be crawling around but like the torch Indy waves around, you will ward them off with the light of Christ. You will find your way out—as the hero in the stories always do—not without loss and suffering but with new wisdom and the power to help heal the world. You will find your way out of the darkness and blinking in the new light, realize you have come home. In Christ, Amen.

