

*Snakes Aplenty*  
PPC  
Lent 4B  
14 March 2021

Numbers 21:4-9  
John 3:1-21

In the movie *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Indy goes to Nepal to find Marion, the daughter of his old archaeology professor, to get her help in his pursuit of the lost ark. He is desperate to find the ark before the Nazis, who are actively looking for it, find it. Unfortunately, in this part of the journey, he believes he witnesses the death of Marion. Undeterred, he goes on to Cairo, determined to be the one who finds the lost ark, the box that holds the Ten Commandments. Outside of Cairo, he comes to the Nazi excavation site know as the Well of Souls, a dark and dank underground chamber. There, in the darkness, he finds Marion alive. The two of them start to leave this place when suddenly they find themselves surrounded by deadly snakes. These snakes are a squirming, wiggling, mass of reptilian flesh. Indy starts to clear the area of them by using burning torches. The task seems endless and hopeless. In the midst of this writhing mass of snakes, Indy speaks his famous line, "Snakes...I hate snakes."

If I met such a mass of snakes, I would want to have Indiana Jones by my side. I don't like snakes and I would freak out by that many surrounding me! Snakes were, and are, symbolic of our deepest, most ominous, fears.

This story in Numbers describes an event in the lives of the wandering Israelites much like Indy finds in the Well of Souls. Suddenly, all around them are poisonous snakes who bite the people. Indeed, many Israelites have died. While this menace is visible, it puts me in mind of the invisible coronavirus that has surrounded us for the

past year. The vaccination against these snakes is delivered by God. God instructs Moses to make a poisonous snake, set it up on a pole and “everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” Moses obeys God and makes a serpent of bronze, sets it up on a pole, and carries it aloft so that whenever someone is bitten, a look at the snake on the pole keeps them from dying.

This became known as the Nehushtan ritual, practiced apparently by the Jewish community for hundreds of years. However, in the time of Hezekiah the practice was outlawed for we read in 2 Kings 18:4: *He removed the high places, broke down pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan.*

The original roots of the story can be found in mythology in many different traditions. The most obvious link to this Hebrew practice is with Asclepius, the ancient Greek god of medicine and healing. His symbol is a snake entwined around a pole. In fact, this rod with a snake wrapped around it, called an askleplan, is the symbol used by the AMA today. Perhaps this was originally used because the snake, in shedding its own skin, becomes whole again.

This is potent symbolism and surfaces again in John’s Gospel as we read today about Jesus speaking enigmatically about himself by lifting up the crucifixion and the “serpent pole”. “And 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). In drawing that image to himself, Jesus speaks of healing.

What a timely image given our current collective preoccupation with the urgency of vaccination, one of the miracles of modern medicine. Scientists have learned how to replicate bacteria and viruses, render them nonlethal, and inject them back into the body as vaccines. These vaccines cause our immune systems to produce killer memory cells against various diseases. The cure for a snakebite is another snake.

Isn't this one of the deepest mysteries of all life? The only sure way to cure an infectious disease is exposure - inoculation - which allows the cell's memory to be activated to destroy the disease if it is introduced into the body. Disease is used to cure disease.

Our common lives are desperately in need of healing from the diseases that plague them. Greed, hatred, self-hatred, fear and apathy, and violence are some of the most obvious. Injustice of all kind invades our social, economic, and political life.

Here is the mind-breaking and agonizing truth of Christianity. We claim that God took our diseases upon God's own self in order to become the antidote to the disease of injustice that we can see wherever we look. This is a hard truth to swallow. There are many who question the dying and degradation of God and ask us "Why would anyone want to lift up such a horrific reality to gaze upon?" Our answer must be that the exposure disrupts the power of the disease - it reveals the love and justice of God in Christ as the antidote. We need to see the disease in order to cure it. When you gaze upon the cross, what do you see?

Last week we read about how Jesus re-signified the Jerusalem Temple as the place of God's dwelling by connecting it to his own body. The Johannine motif of re-signifying key symbols of Judaism by referencing them to Jesus is continued in today's

reading. Jesus sees the bronze serpent and ties it to his being “lifted up” on the cross and from the grave.

Jesus is answering the question put to him by Nicodemus in this discourse which is, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:4). By referring to Moses’ pole, Jesus knew that Nicodemus, the scholar, would understand. The fact that Nicodemus comes to Jesus after dark may indicate that his orthodoxy no longer serves his needs. He needed something more than the dogma of the day. By comparing the crucifixion to the serpent pole of Moses, it is likely that Jesus is teaching us all that we need to confront our fears if we want to be healed. Is this salvation?

“Following Jesus is not a program for self-improvement; it’s an invitation to community.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus was offering Nicodemus, the orthodox Jew, a way to salvation, a path that would lead to the end of his fears. Jesus invites us to join him in a new community. He offers us the chance to leave the network of relationships that perpetuate injustice, death, and alienation. God’s desire is for us to be knit into a network of relationships that brings healing, reconciliation and abundant life, rooted in the eternal.

Like the reactions some people are experiencing to the vaccinations, there is going to be some pain in gazing at the cross clearly. Will we be like Nicodemus and turn away from this invitation, because it may bring pain but leads to being born into eternal life?

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<sup>1</sup> Sarahlaughed.net

Think about how many things are set by our birth in this world. We are born into a geographical location that can accustom us to unjust privilege or prevent us access to clean water, education, the chance to live to adulthood. We are born into families that instill in us a sense that we are loved but too often there are those families who instill a sense that we are deeply inadequate. Our culture puts great worth on the color of our skin. Think of those who grow up hating themselves because they are the wrong color. This world is set up in ways that try to lock us into patterns of relationship based on our birth - patterns that separate us from one another and from God.

What would our relationships look like if we shared one birth and were raised in one loving, supportive family? What would an economy look like that took seriously that we live and work in a world that is our common inheritance and not a set of disconnected chunks of land and resources to be conquered like a Monopoly game? What would a world look like in which we saw every child as our own sibling, if “family first” meant all of God’s children?

These questions can be answered by looking honestly at the cross and recognizing the diseases that we need to cure. What if we allowed ourselves to see in the cross of Jesus, the concentrated essence of all our fears? For when we see that, there is hope for our healing.

If only we could accept the healing that the cross offers. Our world views might be radically altered. That is Jesus’ invitation to us today. Being “born from above” means that Jesus offers us freedom from our fears; when we see the cross as a site of healing, we can let go of all the old thinking and dogma that keeps us in bondage with snake bites devouring us. It’s a way to new, abundant, and eternal life. What would

become of us, I wonder, if we allowed ourselves to see in the cross of Jesus, the concentrated essence of all of our fears, lifted up into consciousness and awareness?

Would that vision give us the courage to get well?

Today we sang, "When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride."

Our journey to Jerusalem brings us closer to the cross. That place where we will find new life.

AMEN.