

SNAKE ON A POLE

John 3:14-21

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Series B)

March 11, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday in Lent comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 3, verses 14 through 21. It is on page 752 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus compares himself to something strange and ugly, and the whole thing is beautiful. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 3, beginning at verse 14, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁴ "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

I want you to think about a snake. Now maybe you don't want to think about a snake. I certainly don't want to think about snakes any more than I absolutely have to. Snakes are creepy. In fact, snakes are so creepy that they actually creep along the ground. They are the definition of creepy. They just slither along through the grass until they're—well, you know—right there at your feet, and you jump in the air and say all the words your parents taught you not to say.

And in addition to just being creepy in every sense of the word, many snakes are also deadly. I for one am very glad we don't have many snakes in this part of the country. When it's the middle of winter, and it's twenty below, and the snow is blowing all over the place, and my car is sliding all sorts of directions on the road, I ask myself, *Why do I live here?* And then I remember, *Oh yeah, snakes.* We don't have many, and the snakes we do have are just those harmless little gardener snakes, which aren't poisonous, and they don't attack people, but they still creep me out. My brain knows they're not dangerous, but I just can't get over it. I suppose there are other animals that might terrify me more—like crocodiles and grizzly bears—but nothing creeps me out like a snake.

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There's even something biblical about this whole snakes-being-creepy thing. This goes back to the Garden of Eden and the fall into sin. The devil came to Adam and Eve in the form of a serpent. "Serpent" is just another word for "snake." And this serpent, or snake, tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God. This is how the curse of sin and death came into the world.

And there was a specific curse placed on the serpent, that is, the devil. God said to him,

- 14 "Because you have done this,
cursed are you above all livestock
and above all beasts of the field;
on your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.
- 15 I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel." (Gen. 3:14-15)

So every time we see a snake slithering along the ground, we should be reminded of the curse God pronounced upon the devil, namely, that God would send an offspring of the woman to crush the devil's head. It's not like snakes are really an incarnation of the devil, but they are a reminder of him, and apparently his trickery of Adam and Eve is why snakes slither on the ground. It kind of sounds like they must have been able to stand upright before the fall into sin. But now they slither on the ground and man seems to have this instinct to crush their heads.

I don't know if you've experienced this feeling or not, but I remember once when I was a kid there was a gardener snake, and I think it got into our garage or maybe even been in our basement. My dad wasn't home, and my mom was creeped out, so she told me to get rid of it. I was really creeped out too, so I don't even know how I caught it. I'm quite certain I didn't actually touch it. I could never bring myself to do that. But I didn't want to just set it free in the backyard. I mean, I couldn't play baseball outside if I knew there was a snake on the loose. So I decided to kill the snake. And I'm not proud of this. The right thing to do would have been to carry it a long ways from our house and set it free. So chalk this up to the sins of my youth. But I distinctly remember this tiny little hammer I had. It was basically a toy. And with a whole bunch of timid little blows—because I was still terrified of this little snake—I crushed its head on the sidewalk.

I think this is the human instinct regarding snakes, and I think it has something to do with the curse in the garden. When you get that fight or flight response to a snake, the fight side of it says, "Crush its head." So you either stomp on it, or you grab whatever is close by and just start swinging at the head. And I really think it has something to do with the curse in the garden. I think these little battles we have with snakes are a picture of the greater battle our Savior has with the ancient serpent, the devil. God promised that our Savior would crush the head of the serpent.

So I guess the moral of the story is, *snakes are the worst*. They're downright creepy, and the Bible even calls them cursed.

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So it's a strange thing that in both the Old Testament lesson and the gospel lesson, snakes are the image of salvation. In both lessons, the image of salvation is a snake on a pole. And it just seems like the most backward thing for God to do. The image of salvation is identical to the image of the curse. But there's a very good reason for why God works this way.

First the Old Testament lesson and the bronze serpent: The year was around 1407 BC, so it was getting very close to the end of Israel's forty years in the wilderness. They were getting fairly close to entering the Promised Land.

But their token sin just keeps coming up. They grumble against God and against Moses. The text says they became impatient (Num. 21:4), kind of like when kids ask, "Are we there yet?" They didn't like all the traveling in the desert. The actual complaint was more along the lines of, "I'm hungry," and, "I'm thirsty." So Moses said, "Hi hungry. Hi thirsty. I'm Moses." This is how dad jokes were invented. Okay, not really. More literally, the Israelites complained about having no food and no water, and they accused Moses of bringing them out to the wilderness to die (Num. 21:5).

Now time and time again God had miraculously provided food and water. For this whole time in the wilderness, there was bread just sitting on the ground in the morning when they came out of their tents. And whenever there was no water, God turned rocks into water fountains (Ex. 17:6; Num. 20:11). It's kind of incredible. So they should know by now that God is providing for all their needs.

And when we read their actual complaint, we learn that the lack of food and water wasn't even true. Listen carefully to what they actually said: "For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food." Now how can you "loathe worthless food" when you don't have any? They kind of sound like whiny little kids saying, "You won't give me anything to eat, and I don't want this hamburger."

It's really kind of funny, but God's not laughing. Their complaint amounts to unbelief and ingratitude for his gifts. So God punished them. He sent "fiery serpents" among them. And we don't know exactly what it meant that they were "fiery." Perhaps they were fiery in appearance. But most likely, people felt like they were burning when they got bit. And the result was that many of the people died from the snake bites (Num. 21:6).

So they realized they had sinned against God. I guess a snake bite can help you appreciate your boring bread a little more. So they repented and asked Moses to intercede for them. And he did (Num. 21:7).

And God gave Moses a really weird remedy. He said, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live" (Num. 21:8). God's remedy for snakebite was a graven image of a snake on a pole. Now this is just weird for a variety of reasons. First, this isn't the typical way to heal snakebite. If a doctor ever prescribes something like this, seek a second opinion ... quickly. Second, the serpent is the image of the devil. It reminds us of the curse and the fall into sin. That doesn't sound right. Third, these people had just been bitten by snakes. Now God wants them to look at a snake in order to be healed. The remedy is the image of the plague. And fourth, this kind of sounds like a violation of the First Commandment, part of which was, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Ex. 20:4). But God commands Moses to make an image of a snake on a

pole, and the people are supposed to look to it for their salvation. And I want all of us to recognize how weird this is, because the strangeness of this image is really the point.

You've probably seen this image before. We have pictures of it all over the place. Your health insurance company might have it as their logo, or you might see it on ambulances or hospitals. The snake on a pole has become a symbol of healing. It's so weird, but here's the thing: the graven image of a serpent on a pole is really an image of Jesus Christ.

When God commanded Moses to make this graven image of a snake, it wasn't an image of a false god. It was an image of the one true God, and by looking to it, the people were saved.

Now that might not make it any less weird. If anything, it might sound even weirder that Jesus ascribes this image of a snake on a pole to himself.

But this is what we read about in the Gospel lesson. It's Jesus' famous conversation with Nicodemus, the one where he talks about being born again (3:3-6), which, by the way, is a reference to Baptism. And it's the same conversation in which Jesus speaks what has probably become the most well-known verse in all of Scripture, John 3:16: **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."**

But what isn't always recognized, is that John 3:16 is about a snake on a pole. Right before this most-famous verse, Jesus says, **"And 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"** (3:14-15). Then he says, **"For God so loved the world ..."** The snake on a pole is a picture of Jesus Christ, and this is the manner in which God loved the world.

So how is the snake on a pole a picture of Jesus? The snake on a pole is a picture of the cross. Obviously you have the cross as the pole. It's this wooden thing standing high up from the earth for everyone to see, just like the pole in Numbers 21. And then you have the curse of all humanity hung on it. I'm talking about Jesus. And I'm serious. This might sound impious, but this is what Jesus would have us learn from his words: that he truly becomes the curse of all humanity. He becomes the snake—the image of all evil. He even becomes the scorn of God's wrath. Jesus becomes everything God hates.

That probably sounds kind of weird, and maybe even a little bit bad, so let me prove it to you from Scripture. First, we have Jesus comparing himself to the snake in this text (3:14). And we also think of 2 Corinthians 5:21, which says, "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." God actually made Jesus to be sin. And we have the language of the curse in Galatians 3:13: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'" (Deut. 21:23). The Scripture clearly teaches that Jesus became a curse. And in Isaiah 53 the prophet says, "It was the will of the LORD to crush him" (Is. 53:10). And he did. Jesus became sin. He became the curse. And he was strung up on a cross like a snake who deserved to die. And in that moment, God the Father desired to crush him. And he did.

This is the event Jesus was talking about when he said, **"For God so loved the world ..."** This hideous sight of a snake of a man on a pole is the manifestation of God's love for the world. For those who were there to witness the crucifixion, it must have been an awful and shameful sight. It was the sort of thing that "men hide their faces" from (Is. 53:3). But in the eyes of God the Father, the sight was even more disgusting, because he saw what was really there behind

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all the blood and shame. He saw the sin of the world. He saw everything that had gone wrong with his beautiful creation, and he poured out his wrath upon it.

And in this way, Jesus Christ, the Son of God in human flesh, drank the cup of God's wrath, down to the very last drop. And he did this so that everyone who looks in faith to this cursed sight **"will not perish but have eternal life."**

So when you see that odd image of a snake wrapped around a pole. Think of Jesus Christ—a snake of a man, nailed to a cross. And think of John 3:16, because this is for your everlasting salvation. And whenever you hear that most-famous verse, **"For God so loved the world ..."** think of Jesus. Think of your snake on a pole. For this snake on a pole is given for your salvation, so **"that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."** Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.