

“For God So Loved the World”

John 3:14–21, Lent 4B

26 March 2006

the Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)

John 3:14–21

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

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷“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. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Prayer.

Call me a girly-man. I don't do snakes. Anything that is cold blooded or crawls, just leave me out of it. I'm the kid at the bus stop waiting in terror when others find a snake, kill it, then play with it until the bus comes. Don't let on to the terror, don't let them see the fear, or else you'll become the next victim, and it will get put down the shirt or shoved into the face.

I don't do snakes, worms, lizards, crocodiles, or alligators. It is probably why I enjoy fly-fishing, always avoiding a worm bucket and bobber. Call me a herpaphobic; that's OK. I'm comfortable in my irrational fears.

Of course I understand intellectually that more people die of bee stings than snakebites. I know that the vast majority of snakes are harmless. It is only a small minority of snakes that are truly deadly. I know there are good snakes and bad snakes. Even so, the closest I want to get to any snake is by use of metaphor. Even then, I'm not truly comfortable.

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Which causes me to uncomfortably turn my attention to our passage from the Old Testament for this morning, Numbers 21:4–9. God sends poisonous snakes to kill the Israelites because they grumbled and complained about their circumstance of wandering in the wilderness. “You brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” (v.5).

And you thought television was violent?!

The Lord sends fiery, poisonous serpents – from the Hebrew word Seraph, which should sound quite familiar, as in Seraphim – to kill the unfaithful, miserable Israelites. They beg Moses to intercede and to relay to God their confession and repentance.

God’s heart is turned. That is a good thing, because it tells us that our God is relational. What we do does make a difference to God. It also tells us that God responds to our initiative.

The Lord instructs Moses to “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” (v.8). Just as a poisonous snake brought death, so too does a poisonous snake bring salvation.

God’s sense of irony should not be overlooked.

The ancient Sumerian’s understood the duality of snakes. Their god of healing walked around with two intertwined snakes upon his staff; a bazaar image that became the symbol for the AMA, the American Medical Association, an intriguing symbol of healing – both threat and salve.

Anyone who has recently gone to a physician may understand the intertwined duality of pain and healing, of death and life. Sometimes a doctor has to do something painful to you to make you whole. Keep that thought in your mind.

All the Israelites who looked away from death – slithering, biting, and causing their feet to burn with fiery poison, – and look up to see the serpent Moses put on a stick, every last one of them are saved.

Look down and die; look up and live.

Jesus knows his scripture, that's for sure. Under cover of darkness, a snake comes slithering into Jesus' life. A man named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews (John 3:1), comes slinking over to Jesus to ask him a few questions.

"No one can do what you are doing apart from the presence of God," Nicodemus bates the trap. "How can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" "How can these things be?" (v. 2, 4, 9) he asks.

"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 3:15) Jesus responds.

Jesus pushes the metaphor a little further, laying the foundation for his suffering, passion, and death. He clearly is speaking about his crucifixion, about being lifted up on Calvary's cross of glory.

Look to the ground, to the world, to human nature for your salvation and you will die. Look up; to the cross of Jesus Christ, and the very one who is able to condemn unto death is the same one who is able to save you into eternal life.

In this strange duality – of serpents that bring both death and life – of Jesus, whose role it is to be our judge as well as our savior – in this strange duality we witness a powerful, deep, and dark symbol of salvation. Somehow in the hands of God, evil and good, threat and promise, life and death are all somehow mixed together. We can't explain it. But we know we are on the threshold of a deeper truth.¹

In this narrative from the Gospel of John, Jesus is not introduced as the "good shepherd." Jesus is lifted up as the "good snake." Like it or not, this is the metaphor Jesus is driving. Jesus the good snake: Now that is a paradigm shift for you!

This metaphor does work, if we take the time and effort to follow where Jesus is leading. We go through life all smug and pleased with how things are, comfortable with family, job, and church. We find the unchanging, predictable nature of life a worthy goal to strive for. Let's just not rock

¹ Willimon, W. H., *Saved by the Snake*, Pulpit Resource, March 26, 2006 (54-55).

the boat, we say to ourselves.

Then suddenly we are startled. Jesus surprises us. Jesus the good snake comes slithering into our illusionary world of safety and stability. We reel back in disgust when confronted by hunger. We wince with pain when we recognize injustice. Poverty, when we have a face associated with it, makes us swallow hard to keep from vomiting.

It's a snake! Run and get a stick. Where is my gun? And we beat it, we whip it, and lift it upon high on a pole; only to discover that what was venomous has now become the anti-venom. What was death has now been transformed into a gift of eternal life.

I know enough to know that there is much that I don't know. Just when I think that I know the difference between good and evil, and I feel empowered to make the judgment call, I am caught off guard and get bit. It is a dangerous thing to attempt to usurp God's prerogative for judgment.

Just when we pull out the shovel to whack evil over the head and to kill it where it's coiled, we are surprised to learn a little bit of truth about ourselves. We discover that with that act of violence, with our condemning judgment, we've become the evil we so deeply deplore.

But all is not lost. There is good news in the story. There is light in the darkness. When it feels both like something is dying inside, when we walk with Christ we discover that something also is being reborn, something is being healed, something is being made whole once again.

God is Lord of both the bad snakes and the good snakes in our world. Even the serpent in the Garden of Eden recognized where true knowledge could be found – and it wasn't in an apple, either!

For God so loves this world, that he gives us his only Son. Everyone who believes in the Son, everyone who believes in Jesus, will not perish by looking down, will not perish at the hand or fangs of the evil one, but will look up, gaze upon him, and have everlasting life.

The good news of this day is that those who look up, who look to Christ, who believe in him, are not condemned, are not left behind in the darkness, but are called forth to the light, to healing, to wholeness, to an

eternity of love with God.

Dear sisters and brothers; this is not a metaphor I would use or feel comfortable with. But it is Jesus' metaphor. Being lifted up, he is the "Good Snake," and gazing upon him will save your life.

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me this day. Amen.