

“Snakes? Why did it have to be snakes?”

**Tuesday, March 24, 2003
Community Lenten Service
Burlington, NC**

Number 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

May we pray together? Gracious God, may we boldly ask to do two things at once? We ask to learn more about you and your will for our lives through this shared time of worship and Bible study today. We also ask you to interpret our presence, our worries, our hopes, and our expectations as incarnational prayers of intercession for all who suffer, especially those involved on both sides of the war in Iraq. Bless now the hearing of your word. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto you. Amen.

One of my favorite movies is “Raiders of the Lost Ark.” As many of you remember, “Raiders of the Lost Ark” is the first of the Indiana Jones movies starring Harrison Ford. Ford’s character, Indiana Jones, is a swashbuckling archeologist who manages to get into all kinds of trouble before he gets the girl and the treasure. “Raiders of the Lost Ark” is set in the 1940s when America is at war with Nazi Germany. Members of the American government compel Indiana Jones to find the lost Ark of the Covenant which held the 10 Commandments. The U.S. government desperately needs to find the lost ark before the Nazis do because, according to legend, the ark is a source of great power. Any army who carries it would be invincible in battle. Not wanting the Nazis to get their hands on the ark, Jones sets off around the world to find it first.

Through a great amount of toil and adventure Dr. Jones finds the exact location of the ark. When he and his faithful Palestinian friend, Salah, finally uncover the entrance to the underground chamber of the lost ark, Salah looks down onto the floor of the antechamber and says to his friend “Indy, the floor is moving.” When Indiana Jones throws a torch down, the light revealed that the antechamber was crawling with snakes. Masses of snakes. Small ones, long ones, cobras that hiss. The path to the lost Ark of the Covenant was covered with thousands of snakes. In order to get the treasure Indiana Jones must confront the snakes. When Dr. Jones comprehends what awaits him in the underground chamber, he leans back and quips “Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?”

In January after I volunteered to preach on this occasion, I looked at the lectionary of recommended Biblical passages to consider for the fourth Sunday in Lent. When I read today’s scriptures I said to myself “Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?” I’m still relatively new to this preaching gig, but I’ve already discovered that sometimes the wackiest, unlikeliest, most improbable scriptures reveal fruitful discoveries when you wrestle faithfully with them. Sure enough- God provided some fairly interesting theological fodder for this occasion, even if our subject is snakes. Let’s turn first to Numbers.

The Israelites grumbled, disobeyed, and complained themselves into many troubles after the exodus from Egypt. In today’s scripture they are wandering in the wilderness because they rejected God’s assurance that they would have victory over the Canaanites. This rejection added 40 years to their homelessness. The Israelites were a quarreling, grumbling people. This time they go back to an old refrain of complaint “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” God had had it with their faithlessness so God skipped any deliberation with Moses and sent down poisonous snakes. Of course the poisonous snakes gave the people something altogether new about which to complain, but at least they learned their lesson. They came repenting of their deeds to Moses saying,

We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” And Moses, being the faithful leader he was, prayed for the people.

God did not take the snakes away. Instead God provided another way out. The poisonous snakes kept right on biting the people. When they got bitten, instead of dying the people could look to a serpent made of bronze placed on a pole erected in the camp. The Bible tells us that “whenever a snake bit someone, that person would look at the serpent and live.”

I don’t know about you, but I would’ve liked that story just as much if God had acquiesced to the people’s wish and had taken those snakes away. I’m all for a world without snakes. But, my brothers and sisters in Christ, we live in a world full of snakes literally and metaphorically. Poisonous snakes surround us. We can pray and pray, but no matter how fervent our prayer, most of the time- the majority of the time- God doesn’t simply take the snakes away. God provides another way out.

Our familiar gospel lesson in John 3 eloquently and directly explains the ultimate way out. God sent Jesus in the world to save us... to save us from personal sins, to save us from corporate sins, to save

us from our private sins, to save us from our public sins, to save us from sins of others, to save us from the sins of history, to save us from selfishness, to save us from aimlessness, and to save us from despair. Jesus Christ, Crucified and Risen, suffered and died to save us. We're here again today pausing on the Lenten road to reflect on God's alternative, on? God's holy provision for us to have a way out of harm, out of death, and out of purposelessness. The fourth gospel clearly reveals to us God's intention among us. God sent Jesus because God loved us. God sent Jesus not because God sought to condemn us, but because God desired restoration with creation, with human souls, and for humans to live peacefully and lovingly with each other. Christ is the ultimate way out.

God's work perfected in Christ, completed on the cross, and witnessed in its perfection and completeness by the eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ is the destination for our Lenten journey. That's the joy that awaits us at Easter, but we're not there yet. Today as we pause on our Lenten journey we must consider the snakes. The snakes of disappointment. The snakes of selfishness. The snakes of fear. The snakes of arrogance. The snakes of greed. The snakes of violence. The snakes of despair. The snakes of apathy.

It is tempting for us as we gather in this beautiful sanctuary to criticize the Israelites and their patterns of sin. It is tempting for us to think that if we had experienced the Passover or seen the parting of the Red Sea that we would never doubt God. It is tempting for us as we hear the words at the end of John about those who choose darkness over light to think of those folks as the "non-believers." We're here during lunch hour on a Tuesday. We're the faithful. We don't chose the darkness, do we? Surely we're not responsible for the snake pit, are we?

As God's beloved children, as ones who seek to be faithful, part of our Lenten journey is to stop and name the snakes that surround us and interfere with our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. Part of the Lenten task is to reckon honestly with our selves about our sin, our motives, our self-interest, our politics, our exclusivity. By naming the snakes that surround us we're brought into truth telling about ourselves, our churches, our society, and each other. We're brought into truth telling about how we've created God in the image of ourselves, instead of having our allegiance to God be first and foremost in our minds, our hearts, and in our deeds.

Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes? My brothers and sisters in Christ, it seems to be that one way or another, there's always snakes. It's up to us to learn to live faithfully among them. The Bible commands and compels us to look to the cross. Look to the cross. Looking is our job, our responsibility, our action. We must consider that God's ultimate possibility for salvation still relies on our volition. We have to be willing to look to God for salvation. We have to be willing to dare to be saved. Call it snake reckoning. Call it Lent. Call it conviction. Call it repentance, introspection, clarity, or transformation. God didn't take those snakes away. Our salvation exists powerfully, clearly, squarely amidst the snakes.

I run the trails at Cedarock Park. From time to time I come across a black snake on my path. Snakes really scare me. I can handle spiders and bugs and teenagers and lots of other things, but snakes really wig me out. Therefore the first time I ran up on a snake at Cedarock remains a vivid memory. Of course I was startled but I'm a granddaughter of farmers so I know that black snakes aren't poisonous and that they're great for the earth's balance. After managing not to faint, something totally expected happened. I saw the beauty of this snake. The two things I hate most about snakes are their scaly skin and the way they move. Instead of being totally grossed out, this time I noticed that this black snake looked like a shiny, polished onyx, beautiful in its glossy depth of black. Secondly I noticed the look in the snake's eye. I've always heard that snakes are as scared of humans as we are of snakes. When I looked in that snake's eyes as it apprehended me, I could tell that I was as an unwelcome of an interloper on that sunny path as he was to me. In that snake's eye I saw vulnerability. In that snake's eye I saw commonality, a commonality of life that I could almost call a shared humanity.

Life in the midst of snakes. Faithful living among snakes. Salvation amidst snakes. It seems to me that there's still a lot to learn. Amen.