

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL**  
**March 15, 2015**

**Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell**  
**Text: Numbers 21: 4-9, John 3: 14-21**

Long before the day that Dennis Johnson found the snake on the playground, picked it up by the tail end, and waved it in front of the girls' faces, I was a bit squeamish about snakes. Not that I let on—the others girls screamed, but I was a reporter, after all, and we were a bit short on news for the 4<sup>th</sup> grade newspaper that I edited! I not only looked at the small, green garter snake—I think I even reached out my finger and touched it, trying really hard not to cringe or scream. Found that it wasn't at all slimy. Nevertheless, snakes are not my favorite part of God's creation. And, I'm not alone: it turns out that in a Harris poll a few years ago, snakes are right up there in things that people fear most (40%)—more even than spiders or speaking in public! A New York Times article even speculated that humans are hard-wired to dislike snakes.

To be fair, I think snakes have gotten bad press. In large part, probably because of the biblical story of creation. The used-car salesman-slimy snake seducing Eve into eating that apple—the snake as evil or even Satan. In today's very strange story from the Hebrew scriptures, the snake plays a different role—or different roles. First, though, I think we need to get expand our ways of looking at this story beyond literally or as historical fact about an "Old Testament" wrathful God who sends horrible punishments upon the people—and then violates God's own commandments by having Moses create a graven image of a snake on a stick. The book of Numbers is not a history text but an odd mix of laws, poems, and stories, including one about a talking donkey. We would not be reading it this morning except that the writer of John lifted a symbol from it and popped it into today's gospel. So, I suggest that we think of this as reflecting how the people themselves tried to understand their trials and tribulations in the desert where they encountered not only snakes, but death, deprivation and miserable food. They might have explained these hardships as punishment sent by God for their speaking against God and Moses—and especially, their forgetting—again!—their God who continued to be faithful and had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, and was leading them to the Promised Land.

I don't often use the King James Version of the Bible. I prefer newer versions have the advantage of studying manuscripts that weren't available when it came into being. But in this case, I think it is helpful. First of all, in the KJV, the snake is described not as "poisonous" but as a "fiery serpent," from the Hebrew "seraph" which is the same word used in Isaiah for winged creatures. We might remember them as placing burning coals on Isaiah's lips when he was called by God to be a prophet. The burning coals were purifying—sort of like cauterizing a wound. When Moses makes the bronze serpent and places it on a pole, and the people look at it, they are healed. So, the serpent both bites and heals.

The other thing I find useful in the KJV, is the description of the people in the desert. Our reading said that they became impatient. That's not hard to understand after those many years of wandering. It's no wonder they remembered the good food in Egypt rather than their slavery! In the KJV, though, it says "the soul of the people was much discouraged" — The Hebrew word, "nephesh" can't be exactly translated, though it is often rendered as "soul." It is really more than soul—it is their very selves, their life energy. So, this anguish might be understood as far more than simple impatience. Their very selves, their collective energy, their *faith* in the God who delivered them, needed healing, restoring.

We might also want to remember that this symbol or totem of a bronze serpent might not have been so unusual for people of the time of Moses as it is for us today. Something to help them look up toward God rather than down at their plight. Look up to remember. To remember their deliverance and that they are God's people.

One thing our texts do not mention is that the Bronze Serpent apparently was later installed in the Temple. In 2 Kings, we learn that it eventually had to be destroyed by King Hezekiah because instead of a symbol reminding people to look up toward God it had become an idol being worshiped for itself.

Jesus knew this story. As did the faithful Jews in his time. And in our Gospel reading, he uses it to make an analogy between the serpent on the pole and lifting up the Son of Man, "that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Jesus says this to the Pharisee, Nicodemus, who has come in the dark of night to ask how it is possible to be born again, and Jesus tells him about being born of the spirit, being reborn from above.

And then comes possibly *the* most familiar Bible verse of all— one that we may have memorized in Sunday School or Confirmation: "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."

This is the verse that has found its way onto bumper stickers and placards in the ball park— no text, just "John 3:16." I'm sure you've seen them.

And I wonder if those bumper stickers and placards are just like the Bronze Serpent on a pole. If John 3:16 has also become an idol, a formula that simplistically substitutes for the more profound message of the Incarnation and Jesus revealing God to us in his life and ministry— and in his sacrifice that overcomes death.

Combined with a narrow understanding of being "born again," it has turned words of reassurance into a weapon that focuses on who is "in" and who is "out." This passage, beloved by many, was considered by some, including Martin Luther to be the "baseline of Christian theology, the summation and completion of the Gospel, and the plan of salvation"<sup>1</sup> One preacher, though, calls it a "scriptural hot air balloon so weighted down by the sandbags of familiarity, sentimentality, fears based on fire and brimstone preaching that it's difficult to give it any kind of spiritual lift-off." He goes on to point to the irony of Jesus trying to help a rigid, legalistic Pharisee see more expansively, and then having his words used as the very symbol of conditional, exclusive Christianity.

We must read beyond verse 16 and delve deeper, because this is so much broader than that— John's theological reflection on the incarnation and its purpose. A testimony to the expansive love of God who has sent his son to show us that love.

Jesus brought light into the world, and that light illumines. It does not condemn, but it does expose the shadows in the corners, our woundedness, our shortcomings. And sometimes we hide from the light because we don't really want to look at these wounds, these inadequacies. We hide behind our masks— from others, from ourselves, and from God. What is really needed is to bathe boldly in the

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<sup>1</sup> J. Bennett Guess, from 2015 sermon on

light, and whatever serpents exist in our lives, for that is ultimately how we are healed. Just as the Israelites were healed by looking at the very thing that bit them.

God does not so much call us out into the light as meet us in whatever darkness we may suffer. Because the light is already there. And we may choose to continue to gaze down, down, down, into the dark or we can look up. It is about how we live in the light that Christ brings that enables us to see God more fully and more completely. It is about following in Christ's way and keeping our hearts and minds focused on God's saving love. Looking up and remembering. That is what will guide us through whatever wilderness we endure, whatever snakes or other scary things lie in our path. That is what will bring us new life.

Amen..