

SNAKE SALVATION¹

Sermon by Margaret F. Beamguard

First Presbyterian Church
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Numbers 21:4-9
John 3:14-21

In the Gospel of John, Jesus frequently uses simple, everyday comparisons² to help people understand who he is. When Jesus passes through Samaria and encounters the woman at the well, he takes advantage of the setting to talk about living water. After Jesus feeds 5,000 people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish and the disciples gather up baskets full of leftovers, he says "I am the bread of life, who ever comes to me will never be hungry." Just before Jesus heals the man born blind, he says "I am the light of the world." And just after Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born from above, Jesus says "...as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up. . ."

Water, bread, light and . . . Snakes?! The first three images are familiar and comforting. We can agree, that: Christ, like water cleans and refreshes, Christ, like bread nourishes and sustains; Christ, like light brightens and leads the way. But what could snakes possibly have to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

I am pretty confident that the very mention of snakes from this pulpit sets some of you to squirming in your pew or sends shivers up your spine. I have data to back me up on this. As recently as 1999 a Harris Poll³ reported that 40 percent of Americans named snakes as their biggest fear. Snakes, in this particular poll, beat out other fears and phobias like public speaking, spiders and heights.

Some will argue that there are good snakes and bad snakes. The long black snake is a good snake, while the smaller brown southern copperhead is a bad snake. Then there are the class of people for whom snakes are snakes, and when you cross one there is no time to stop and make such fine distinctions. You reach for the axe or the garden hoe. The only good snake is a dead snake, they say.

I, myself, don't mind them so much. I've even gone so far as to touch one at the zoo - cool and strong. It is hard not to admire a creature that can travel 6 miles an hour without feet or climb

¹ This sermon owes credit to the scholarship and insight of three sermons:

Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Snake Savior" *Sermons from Duke Chapel*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, pp. 348-353

William H. Willimon, "Saved by the Snake" *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 34, No. 1, Minnesota: Logos Productions Inc. 2006, pp. 53-56.

And the definitive treatment of the text: William W. Williamson, "Snake on a Stick," preached March 30, 2003, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, TN

² The following analogies are pointed out in a sermon titled "Serpents, Penguins, and Crosses" at www.preachersmagazine.org/webPFVmar26.htm

³ Willimon, 56.

trees without hands.⁴ It is hard not to admire a creature that can make such a distinctive sound with no vocal cords. It is hard not to admire a creature that can shed its own skin.

I do however prefer them in the zoo, contained in the shadowy cubby holes and behind the thick glass of the Reptile Exhibit. Because at the same time it is hard not to fear a creature that lurks in dark corners and usually comes out at night, that brandishes long fangs and sprays venom, and can strike at half it's length.

However you come down on snakes, they don't hold the same cuddly appeal as bunny rabbits. But as far as I know there is no mention of Peter Cottontail in the holy writ. But there are snakes.

“As Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up. . .“ With these words, Jesus calls forth an unfamiliar image for us, but one that would have been quickly understood by the Jewish community. They would have recalled the strange story of their ancestors, lost between Egypt and the promised land, and the fiery serpents sent by God to punish them for complaining.

The Hebrews had grown impatient. They were ready to get to where they'd been going for nearly 40 years. They were tired of the food: Manna for breakfast. Manna for lunch. Manna for dinner. Manna for dessert. “Would you like your manna with a side of. . . Manna?”

God, apparently, is impatient, too. After all that God has done: dividing the waters, delivering them from slavery, sending manna and quails, bringing forth water from rocks, and giving the law – the Hebrews still have the nerve to complain.

God does something of which we have a hard time making sense. Weary of the Hebrew's complaining and frustrated with their lack of faith - God sends serpents, fiery snakes to bite the Hebrews. There were snakes everywhere: Snakes in the tents, snakes in the bed rolls, snakes in the cribs, snakes in the shower, snakes in the shoes. The wilderness was crawling with snakes. People were dying.

“Poisoned”⁵ back to their senses, the Hebrew people came to Moses, saying we are worthless sinners, please ask God to call off the snakes – a request which Moses obliges. But God does not call off the snakes. God does not remove the threat. Instead, God does something else of which we have a hard time making sense. Moses, God says, is to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Then when the people are bitten, they are to look at the snake on the pole and live. Instead of looking down at the writhing, venomous animals, they are to look up. The snake of their suffering becomes their salvation.

Now, being as suspicious as we modern day folk are of anything smelling remotely like snake oil, we might want to ask a few questions about how this snake salvation works. But we aren't going to get any satisfactory, scientific answers from the text. This mode of healing has come from the mind of God, and there is not a one of us capable of understanding that.

⁴ Taylor, 349-350.

⁵ Willimon, 55.

What we can understand is that Moses makes a replica of the very evil that people fear. Barbara Brown Taylor⁶ notes that Moses takes the source of the Hebrew's anxiety, pulls it up from beneath their feet, puts it up on a pole, makes them look at it, and they are able there to see that the serpent of terrible death has become the serpent of awesome life.

It is as strange a story as any in the Bible, I suppose.

Still, how wonderful would that be, if all we had to do to cure a snake bite was to look at a bronze snake on a pole?⁷ No trip to the ER, no anti-venom injection. Those nutty nature guys on cable T.V. like the Crocodile Hunter and Jeff Corwin would really have it made. Think of all the trouble they could get into.

And what if this would work for other things that sting and bite us – since really our odds of meeting a snake in the bread aisle of Kroger or stepping on one at a Main Street cross walk are pretty slim. There are bigger things than snakes that scare us.

A group⁸ was setting out to go hiking through the east Tennessee Mountains when one in their number said: “I want everyone to know that I am deathly afraid of snakes. I suffer from herpophobia. So I am fine, but don't anybody come across a snake, and if you do, don't tell me about it or I go truly ballistic.” And someone said to her, “That's wonderful. The thing you fear most in life is a secretive reptile, the chances of which seeing are extremely slim. I almost envy you. I fear planes crashing into buildings, buildings crashing to the ground, the collapse of my 401 K, the bird flu, and my failures as a parent. You are lucky if the thing that scares the wits out of you is a reptile.”

What if, we could take the other things that assail us and put them on a pole, look at them, and not be troubled by their affects any longer?⁹

What if we could take away the writhing of addiction by putting the junkie's needle or the alcoholic's bottle on a pole and gazing at it?

What if we could take away the bite of debt by putting a Master Card on a pole looking upon it?

What if we could take away the spreading fire of cancer by putting a malignant tumor on a pole and staring it down?

What if we could suck out the venom of war by putting weapons of mass destruction on a pole? Look at them, the fighting stops, peace prevails, and life resumes. What a perfect solution we have stumbled upon, this snake salvation! Look at it, whatever evil or pain it is that afflicts you, and life is restored! Look at it and live!

This would be a handy solution; except for it is not only external things that cause us pain. There is all of the stuff inside, the stuff of sin – the greed and anger, the selfishness and self doubt, the

⁶ Taylor, 352.

⁷ This question is raised and aptly answered in William W. Williamson's sermon, “Snake on a Stick.”

⁸ Story altered from Pulpit Resource, 56.

⁹ The following scenarios are mentioned in Williamson, 2.

jealousy and pride. Could we put all of that - our very selves on a pole, and look at that too, and be restored?

The snake that Moses fashioned became a powerful symbol of salvation. It became such an influence over the people that centuries later, long after Moses' death, King Hezekiah had it smashed to pieces to keep the people from worshipping it rather than the God who gave it to them.

And now the Gospel of John says that Jesus dares to use this bronze serpent on a pole as a figure of himself: "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."

And that is a story that may be even stranger than the one we find in the Book of Numbers.

Jesus uses the shocking story from the days of Moses to describe how he is going to save the world. This single image may explain why the early church Fathers were apt to call Jesus not only the Good Shepherd, but also the good snake.¹⁰

As much as we might try to overlook it, to ignore it – there is something slightly serpentine about Savior. As much as Jesus is like water or bread or light – Jesus is perhaps also just as much like a serpent, surprising us, coming among us, slipping into our illusions.

He opened his mouth and spoke words that cut us like a sword: venomous, prophetic words. Words that scared and stung. And we reached for the garden hoe. We impaled him on a pole.¹¹ After all, "So the Son of man must be lifted up. . . ." He said. And, looking up at him, something strange happened. God did something of which we have a hard time making sense. . . We were healed.

I don't know how. I do know this is no snake oil, but it may yet be a little snake salvation. When we lifted Jesus on the cross, he took on our sin. He who was wholly good, took upon himself all in us that is wholly bad. He who was entirely beautiful, took upon himself all in us that is entirely ugly. He took all of the dark evil that causes us fear and makes us cause fear in others, and made us look up at it there on the cross. And we were healed.

We can't explain it. But we know that we are on the threshold of a deep truth. We are at the very heart of the Christian faith. To look at Jesus lifted up, on the cross and now also in glory, we can see the truth of salvation.

Jesus, living water. Jesus, bread of life. Jesus, light of the world. Jesus, serpent savior.

"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."

Look upon him, risk him, and live. Amen.

¹⁰ Taylor, 353.

¹¹ Willimon, 55.