

Numbers 21:4-9 (NRSV)

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. [5] The people spoke against God and against Moses, "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." [6] Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. [7] The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. [8] And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." [9] So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3:14-21 (NRSV)

And just 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, 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. [18] Those 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. [19] And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. [20] For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. [21] But 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."

SPIES AND THE PROMISED LAND

In the story of the Exodus you'll remember that God led his people out of captivity in Egypt with mighty signs and wonders. And finally they came to the border of the Promised Land.

Twelve spies were sent into the land, and they found it to be all that God had promised. It was lush and fertile. But, there was a problem, at least according to ten of the twelve spies. The land was wonderful, but it was also filled with mighty warriors. They were so big that the spies said that they felt like grasshoppers next to them. According to these ten spies, there was no way that a rag tag band of refugees could ever conquer this land.

But, two of the spies filed a different report. Joshua and Caleb said the warriors in the land were indeed mighty, but this should not stop them from entering the land. The children of Israel should proceed despite the odds because for God had promised them this land.

It was a test of faith. The Lord had miraculously preserved his people to this point; He would help them prevail in their struggle to gain the Promised Land.

But, the people decided to follow the advice of the ten fearful spies instead of the two faithful spies. They broke camp, left the Promised Land and returned to the wilderness.

God was not pleased with his people's lack of faith so he decreed that they wander in that wilderness they had chosen for themselves; they would wander for forty years. And in that forty year span every one who had doubted God died. Only Moses and the faithful spies, Joshua and Caleb were left to enter the Promised Land.

FIERY SERPENTS

But, as the saying goes the "apple doesn't fall far from the tree." The children of those who died in the wilderness also began to doubt the goodness of God. They said, like their father and mothers before them, "Let's go back to Egypt. At least there we had food and a place to live."

Like their fathers and mothers before them they had lost faith in their leaders and they had lost faith in God. They detested the miserable food that God provided; even manna from heaven wasn't good enough for these children of doubters!

And once again God punished them for their faithless ways. This time he sent fiery serpents. God sent poisonous snakes into their camp. There were snakes everywhere, snakes in their bread baskets, snakes in their bedrolls, snakes in the cribs.

You know the panic you feel when you're weeding the garden and just as reach under the bush you see staring back at you. Well, imagine the kind of panic that sets in when you encounter not one or two harmless garden snakes but a whole nest of spitting cobras! That's what confronted God's people in the wilderness.

TOUCHED BY AN ANGEL, THE REMIX

It's interesting to note that the word translated fiery serpents in our Old Testament lesson for today is the Hebrew word "Seraph." That word is also used to describe the beings who are with God in glory. The "Seraphim" are heavenly creatures who surround the throne of God in the prophet Isaiah's vision of the Almighty.

These fiery, frightening Seraphim, these slithering serpents have been sent by God to hurt and ultimately save God's people. Salvation can come in some strange ways.

Everyone wants to talk about angels these days. There was a TV show about angels that aired a few years back. I liked that show. The angel on that show was my kind of angel; she was a really good looking woman who always wanted to guard and help. She never threatened or bit anyone.

I wouldn't mind being touched by an angel like that!

But, God's angels, at least those described in the Bible are not like the TV version. They are more likely to inspire fear than warm fuzzy feelings. In this story God's messengers are snakes, fiery serpents sent by God to bite the people into their senses.

When God's people come close to death they remember how much they like life. They are shocked into recognizing that they owe God and his servant Moses everything.

LOOK UP AND BE SAVED

And when you're "snake bit" it doesn't take long to repent. The people came to Moses on their knees and said, "We have sinned against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord might save us from these horrible creatures."

So Moses fell on his knees and prayed for the children of Israel. And God told Moses to take a consecrated brass vessel at the door of the Tent of Meeting and hammer it into the image of the serpents that were attacking his people.

Moses did as he was told and wound the brass snake around the crosspiece of his staff. He then ran through the camp with his staff lifted high for all to see. He called out to the people in their agony,

"Look up! Look up and be saved! Look up! Look and be saved!"

Now think about this for a moment. If you are surrounded by a brood of poisonous vipers, are you going to look up? Will you quit trying to pull these creatures off yourself and your children and look instead at a brass snake on a pole?

It took faith to look up instead of about, but that's exactly what some did. And the Bible tells us that those men and women who looked up did not die. They were saved.

One preacher brought out a very good point when it came to this story of salvation. She said that just because they looked up and were saved didn't mean that they escaped the snake bites; it simply meant that those who looked up did not die from their wounds.

And a year and a half later, these people who had the courage to look up instead of about in their time of need crossed the Jordan and entered the land flowing with milk and honey, the land that God had promised them.

LOOK UP INSTEAD OF ABOUT

None of us will make it through life without experiencing the pain of being “snake bit.” Sometimes it will be punishment for our own foolish ways. Sometimes it will be bad luck. Sometimes it will be a test of faith. But, all of us will be bitten, painfully bitten from time to time.

Life is full of snake bites. We can’t control that. But, we can control how we respond to being bitten. We can look up instead of about. We can look up at the sign of salvation that God has provided instead of focusing all our energies on the problems that surround us.

You see, when we struggle too much with what is tormenting us, we empower it to hurt us even more. We will die from that struggle. What we need to do is to look up instead of about.

Barbara Brown Taylor notes that Moses takes the source of anxiety, pulls it up from beneath their feet, puts it up on a pole, and makes them look at it. And then they are able to see that the terrible death has become the Seraph of awesome life. The snakes that appear because of the people’s sin have become the means for leading people out of sin.

The snakes that were the means of death have become the way of life.

Our New Testament lesson for today is also about looking up instead of about. Jesus told Nicodemus, a Pharisee who was seeking the salvation of God,

“And just 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.”
John 3:14-15 (NRSV)

Jesus was referring to his death on the cross. Jesus would become the new symbol of salvation for God’s people. Jesus would die for the sins of the world upon the cross. And those that look up to that cross would be saved.

THE CROSS TODAY

Our Savior is high and lifted up as we sang (will sing) in our anthem for today. And he is high and lifted up first of all on a cross.

God loved us so much that he sent his Son into the world to redeem us from ourselves. And what did we do? We killed him. We crucified him. We lifted him up on a cross and mocked him.

Now you might say,

“What do you mean when you say we? We didn’t do that. That’s what the Romans did long ago. That’s what the Jewish leaders did long ago.”

And you would be right of course.

But, just as the cross is a symbol of God’s salvation yesterday and today and tomorrow, so the cross is also a symbol of evil, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. It is not just about their evil long ago. It is about our evil ways today.

Don’t think that anything different would happen to Jesus if he came in our era instead of two thousand years ago. Our technology has changed in that time, but the hearts of men and women have not changed.

We still do not want to hear the truth about ourselves.

And if Jesus did anything, he told the truth about those who laid down their lips but not their life for God.

THE GOOD SNAKE

One preacher said that Jesus was not only the “good shepherd” but also the “good snake”. He spoke words that “cut us like a sword, venomous, prophetic words. And we beat him, whipped him, and lifted him up high on a pole.

And in lifting him up from earth toward heaven, his poisonous, prophetic words of venom became the anti-venom, the means of salvation. And even those who had killed him, standing at the foot of the pole, were able to look up and say, ‘Truly this is the Son of God.’”

Have you ever been by the Serpentarium in St. Cloud? The guy who runs that place has all kinds of venomous snakes. He's been bitten many times and has almost lost his life on several occasions. And yet he continues to handle these deadly creatures. Why?

He harvests their venom to make anti-venom. His willingness to face danger enables an antidote to be made for those who are bitten by a poisonous snake. Salvation comes at a price.

In a much greater way, God's salvation came into the world through the courage and sacrifice of Jesus. The cross, a symbol of despair and shame became in the hands of God a symbol of forgiveness and life eternal. On the cross the fiery serpent did its worst. But, on the cross the sting of that fiery serpent, the sting of death was destroyed forever.

As Paul would later proclaim in his letter to the Corinthians,

“Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death is your victory? Where O death is your sting?”

On the cross the ultimate symbol of cruelty and evil became a sign of hope. God has a way of turning the most deadly situation around and using it for good.

We need to remember that all of the snakes in the world belong to God, the slithering ones that are alive, the beautiful brass ones on a staff, the death dealing ones and the life giving ones.

In this story there are good snakes and there are bad snakes, but they all belong to God. God uses good and God uses evil for his own purposes.

And God still can take a hopeless situation and transform it, if only we have the courage to look up instead of about.

A STRUGGLE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

In our gospel lesson for today we learn that life is always a struggle, a struggle between good and evil, a struggle between faith and fear. Alexander Solzhenitsyn exposed the

Soviet penal system in his three-volume *Gulag Archipelago*. And he concluded that work by writing this,

"When I lay there on rotting prison straw...it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts.

This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains...an un-uprooted small corner of evil."

In the Bible we read the same story. Those who witnessed the power of God in mighty ways often rejected him and those he sent for their salvation. And those who seemed beyond redemption often miraculously found salvation.

In the gospels this theme is especially pronounced. The religious leaders are in the dark, and only the blind man can see the power of God in Jesus Christ.

LIFT HIGH THE CROSS

If this is true, if there is indeed evil in all of us, then we must take the cross more seriously. The cross is not a piece of jewelry. The cross is a terrible symbol of sacrifice and pain. It is our equivalent of the bronze serpent on a pole.

It is a frightening thing to behold. It reminds us of pain and loss. The cross reminds us of our own fears and faithless ways.

We sing a song entitled "Lift High the Cross."
The song has a soaring, triumphant melody. I love it.

But it seems to me that we must first sing "lift high the cross" to a melody that is somber and in a minor key. The cross represents evil, not just any evil but the evil that is in me.

One commentator wrote,
"We put on a smiling face as creatures of the light, but coiled up in our heart of hearts are death-dealing serpents. We try to make God into a more pleasing image. Our savior is the one who always brings us good things, who gives us our heart's desire, who makes life easier for us."

But, the one who comes to us comes in threatening appearance. He comes with biting words. His appearance sometimes makes life considerably more difficult for us, and He often surprises us with the truth about ourselves.

So let's do like the song says. Let's lift high the cross. It is the sign of our salvation. All those who look upon it will be saved through the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

But, never forget that following Jesus is about taking up a cross as well as looking at a cross. Something in us has to die in order that we might truly live. If we are to be born again, born from above, then the old way of life has to be crucified.

Our Scripture for today is very familiar. We think that we know what it means, but like Nicodemus, the religious leader of old, we sometimes act as if we're clueless. The only way to the Promised Land is through the wilderness filled with fiery serpents who remind us of our sin and our faithless ways.

For forty days in Lent we talk of sin. We gaze upon the symbol of our evil ways.

We remember that angels can sometimes look like enemies, and messengers of God can bring us messages that we don't particularly like, and a true Savior may sting us, before he saves us.

Lift high the cross.
Look up! Look up!
Your salvation draws near.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN