

John 3:14-21

March 10, 2024

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

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

Have you ever noticed that snakes have an interesting presence in the Bible?

We have the snake in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. We have the Seraphim in Isaiah, which are flying snakes/angels, if you can imagine that. Yee! We have Moses’ staff that turned into a snake and swallowed up the snakes Pharaoh’s magicians sent against him. And we have the snakes in today’s reading from Numbers, including the bronze one to which Jesus compares himself.

Snakes? Why does it have to be snakes?

How many of you like snakes?

I don’t mind them, but they do give me a fright when I first see them.

My cat in Nebraska loved chewing on garter snakes. He would bring them up out of the basement and just chew on them in the living room. Gah!

The last one that that he brought upstairs I scooped up with a snow shovel and threw it outside. I told it to tell its friends about the cat that lives here who likes to chew on them. I never saw another snake in the house. True story.

But snakes are part of God’s good creation. If you have garter snakes, they eat all sorts of creepy crawlies that I’m not a big fan of myself. And if you have a bull snake you are especially in luck because they eat the bigger things that we don’t like to have around like mice and rats, and they can even take on a rattlesnake.

In the Mediterranean world, house snakes were highly sought after. A house snake would take care of the mice, rats, lizards, and other things you didn’t want in your house. They were like a legless cat.

And the fact that snakes slough off their skin has made them a symbol of renewal for a very long time, and even as a symbol of resurrection.

How often have you heard someone say that they shed off their old skin when they have made a major change in their lives? That saying is tied to the snake shedding its skin.

When a snake gets too big for the old skin, it comes off and there is a brand new bright and shiny skin underneath. It’s actually pretty cool. They outgrow their old skin and get a new one that is already there waiting for them.

Not that it is an easy task for the snake. It's actually quite uncomfortable. When you see a snake with milky eyes, it means it's getting ready to slough, so you should leave it alone. Because it cannot see well, it is more aggressive.

So, snakes. Why does it have to be snakes? Why does Jesus have to compare himself to the snake that Moses put up on a pole in the wilderness?

Well – let's take a look at Numbers 21. The people are once again complaining, and this is actually the 7th and last time that they complain, and this time its not just against Moses, but against God.

God – you have put us here in this miserable wilderness, you have taken us from Egypt with the beautiful flowing Nile, you only feed us this miserable manna and quail without any garlic or onion, it's so dry and hot, and we just hate it here!

And God is fed up with them. I can't stand any more of your complaining! You complained about slavery in Egypt and I set you free. You hated being in Egypt and I am bringing you to your own land, and all you do is complain. Non-stop complaining. I can't take it anymore!

So, God lets loose the vipers who bite some of the people and they die.

Shocking right? God sent poisonous snakes among God's people?!

This is actually part of an ongoing pattern between God and the people in the wilderness. Things are good, and then the people complain, and then they die, and then they repent, and then God shows mercy, and the pattern repeats. Over and over again. For some reason, they just can't learn the lesson God is trying to teach them out there in the wilderness before they enter the Promised Land – to trust God and that God is taking care of them.

But, People tend to have a very short memory about the good that they have received, right? The Israelites had freedom from slavery, food, water, God with them – and yet they always turn to complaining – there is food, but it is detestable – we'd rather be slaves in Egypt. Really?

Let's not forget that God heard their complaining and came for them. Maybe at this point God was thinking – you're wasting my time. You called, I came, and now you are complaining. Don't you trust me? Still? After all we have been through? I have never abandoned you and have always cared about you.

I guess even God meets a breaking point, and this was it. The final straw.

If you cannot trust me, you cannot go forward into the Promised Land.

And so, the people have to learn a very important lesson. God will not remove the poisonous snakes, but God will give a cure for their bite.

So, Moses creates a bronze snake and puts it up on a very high pole where it can be seen from every location in camp and when a person is bit, they need only look up at the snake and they will be healed. They need only trust God's promise and they will live.

Snakes. Why does it have to be snakes? Well... snakes have been used in the Bible as a symbol for the lack of trust in God.

Adam and Eve didn't trust God's word and fell into the temptation of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. They took the serpent's word over God's word, and there were ramifications for it, but God continued to care for them by showing them mercy.

The bite of the poisonous snake is the bite that wakes us up to the fact that we have turned from God. It wakes us up to the reality that separation from God is death.

Snakes. It has to be snakes, because they make us aware of what is killing us. We have to look at them right in the eye, and only then can we trust God and God's promise of salvation, because we cannot save ourselves.

We need God. The snake tempts us into thinking we do not, and then bites us, but that's not the end of the story. God saves us from our sin.

One of the Spiritual exercises of Lent is to do a very meaningful examine of ourselves and identify the things that bite us, the things that kill us by separating us from God, knowing that once they are identified, they lose all of their power.

In the wilderness, God was showing the people mercy by allowing them to see their own sin. Unless we recognize our sin, we cannot repent, turn back to God, and then trust or lean on God who is much more powerful than we are.

When Jesus is put up on the cross, just like the serpent was, we are forced to look our sin right in the eye, right in God's eyes in Jesus' crucifixion.

Our sin, our lack of trust in God, our wanting to do it all by ourselves, puts Jesus up on the cross. It is only when we see the ramifications of our sin, our lack of trust in God, that we can repent and turn back to God.

Jesus on the cross is the result of us turning away from God. The Temple elite had turned to Rome for peace. They followed the ways of empire instead of the Kingdom of God. They valued money over people. They wanted power and prestige at any cost.

And the cost was God being hung on the Roman cross, the punishment for rebellion against Rome. Let that one sink in for a moment.

God was hung on the empire's symbol of power, the symbol that kept the pax Romana, the peace of Rome, intact through fear.

But Jesus goes to the cross without fear, because his trust is in God alone.

Jesus on the cross is our call to look at our sin head on and see what is killing us. But it doesn't end there. We just don't look at our sin and wallow in guilt or shame. No!

We are forgiven our sin. Jesus is risen from the dead and forgives us our sin so that we can live – live in God's Kingdom! The God of life wants us to have life, abundant life! So, God is always giving us life – always – because that is what God does.

Sin kills, but God gives eternal life, and so it is to God that we turn whenever we are afraid.

Sin loves fear. It thrives on it. But God gives us confidence, encouragement, and the faith to face all the snakes in our lives, to stare them down and live.

As they say in AA, the first step is admitting you have a problem, only then can you examine it, get to know it better, and then let it be conquered by God.

What causes your snake to bite? What brings it on? What is your complaint against God? What are you afraid of?

Identifying those things is what charms the snake and makes it putty in our hands, putty that can be transformed into something new. And then, like the snake, we can slough off our old skin and be renewed, living a revitalized life.

Repentance, the confession of our sin, and then the assurance of forgiveness makes us new people. It is the gift of Jesus' death and resurrection. Look to Christ and live.

The truth is that sin isn't going anywhere. It is a part of us. The vipers remain. But God isn't going anywhere either. God refuses to leave us on our own and is constantly bringing us new life over and over and over again. That is God's promise to us.

And should you ever be tempted to doubt that promise, just look to the cross and remember that sin didn't leave Jesus on the cross. Christ is risen from the dead!

Thanks be to God. Amen.