

Message Snakes in the Wilderness

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

John 3:1-17 (NRSV)

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I am not much of a hiker, and I have not tent camped in the wilderness. Today's sermon will clarify why. I am one of the many people who totally understood Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. 1981

Perhaps you remember the scene as they arrive at the real location of the lost ark:

Sallah: Indy, why does the floor move?

Indiana Jones: Give me your torch.... (*Lowers the torch into the hole in the floor and then says*

"Snakes. Why'd it have to be snakes?"

Sallah: Asps... very dangerous... you go first, Indy.

Indiana Jones, who is afraid of nothing, is afraid of snakes. If you watch through the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* 1989, you will discover why: when Indy was a young person, he had an adventure during which he falls into a circus train full of snakes.

So Indiana has a reason to be afraid of snakes. But actually, when the Gallup organization did a poll almost 20 years ago, they found that *"...what really strikes fear in the hearts of many Americans are snakes. A recent Gallup poll that asked adults what they were afraid of reveals that more people -- 51% -- fear snakes than any other suggested possibility, including speaking in public in front of an audience (40%) and heights (36%)."*

In our scripture lesson from John, Jesus refers to snakes. We share the fears of our neighbors and friends, and yet we read this story in scripture that refers to snakes as healing.

The symbol of a serpent or snake played important roles in religious and cultural life of ancient Egypt, Canaan, Mesopotamia and Greece. The serpent was a symbol of evil power and chaos from the underworld as well as a symbol of fertility, life and healing.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus made mention of the snakes that bit and were killing the people in the wilderness. When Moses prayed for the people, God instructed him to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole so the people could be healed – when they looked at it and saw it. Numbers 21:9 Jesus spoke of this lifted up snake when he foretold his crucifixion to a Jewish teacher named Nicodemus. Jesus compared the act

of raising up the Mosaic serpent on a pole, with the raising up of the Son of Man on a cross (John 3:14-15)

Based on Olson, Dennis T. (1996). Numbers. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. pp. 135–8.

Jesus is referring to a story that Nicodemus would have known well. Jesus is connecting the healing and salvation of the people from the snakes in the book of Numbers, while the people Israel were in the wilderness with the actions of the Son of Man – the Messiah who Nicodemus came asking about.

You know this passage in John. You have memorized this verse. And you have probably seen the folks in the stands at football games – holding up cards with the reference to John 3:16 – I often wonder if anyone who has no idea what those cards mean ever gets to look that up – probably much more frequently now that Google can do the work for them from the couch or the other side of the stadium.

But do the cards get people to look up? Does it get people questioning or getting beyond that verse to the whole story? But it is not a matter of an intellectual belief or a blind assent --- it is not right to make these verses from John seem to divide the world. Jesus was talking about the healing of the whole world. Faith is about a trust that cuts into the whole of our lives. Daily.

And like Nicodemus, we may have trouble with really being open and vulnerable. But life has a way of bringing us to vulnerability.

As Kathryn Mathews says:

"We sense that Nicodemus knows that things aren't so simple.

He himself may appear to be coming from a place of strength: after all, he's one of "the power elite" among his own people, at least, an educated man in an age when most folks can't even read. A respected leader, he probably lives a relatively comfortable life in material terms.

We're used to Jesus being approached by people in urgent need of healing, or food, or forgiveness, and their need makes them vulnerable and open. Nicodemus, for all of his power and prestige, comes to Jesus in another kind of need: a need for answers, and for help in understanding the answers he gets.

It isn't until the end of his conversation that his vulnerability shows, just a bit, perhaps, in his bewildered question, "How can these things be?" We can feel the change in his tone from his first, self-confident words about what "we know."

Nicodemus may not know physical hunger, but his spiritual hunger drives him to Jesus in the dark of night, when many of us wrestle with questions and doubts, and face our deepest needs. Of course, it also helps that his other respected colleagues won't see him if he talks to Jesus under cover of night; they might wonder if his "faith" needs a little fine-tuning, and they might judge him for it."

https://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_march_8_2020

In that Gallup Poll there was another strange thing: Only 19% of people reported being afraid of death. But life has a way of bringing us to vulnerability even as we contemplate snakes and other fears. Life will bring us to think about death. We may be afraid of it, but death is around us. Our loved ones, our neighbors, our friends, our friends' children. We watch them suffer. We suffer with them. And that is why we need Lent....to be honest about those fears.

PCUSA former Co-Moderator and Pastor Jan Edmiston reminds us that:
*"Lent reminds us that there is a world of suffering out there.... This is the season when we remember that death is part of life, and we are called to notice it. We are called to face it. **We are called to let the reality of death re-prioritize our lives.**"*

<https://achurchforstarvingartists.blog/2018/02/22/dont-easter-my-lent/>

To look at our fears and let them change us. To let the reality of our suffering change the way we live. Nicodemus wanted answers. He was a learned man, but the questions remained and troubled him. Hard questions like: How? Why? These are the questions we struggle with...these are our snakes in the wilderness that bite us and keep us in turmoil and pain. Jesus reminded Nicodemus that the snakes in the wilderness can also be the one that is lifted up in love by God's grace and heals us.

Marcus Borg says that faith that "believes God" is not something we can simply will, on our own: *"we are led into it. It grows.... It is not a requirement that we are to meet but a quality that grows as our relationship with God deepens." But we do have to "take the first step," he says, "and then another (though sometimes we are virtually pushed into this by desperation or lured into it by example or experience)."*

https://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_march_8_2020

That same verse that has been used by some to judge us is actually reassuring us about where that hope comes from: a God who truly loves the world. When we look up at the raised-up staff and the cross we remember how God loved and loves this world.

As Rev. Elizabeth Lovell Milford said:

"... God loved this world, this messed up, full of snakes, suffering world with all of its sin and pain. ... it was to this wilderness of a world that God sent Jesus Christ, that we might lift our eyes and see love. And indeed, our Lord even spent time in the literal wilderness. 40 days in fact. Which means that even if we are in the midst of a pit of snakes, or worse, find ourselves bitten, we know that we do not have to travel this desert road alone. For we travel with one who has been lifted up and who indeed overcomes all evil with good. That, in the midst of the wilderness, is good news. Especially when snakes are involved."

<https://www.heritagepres.com/sundays-sermon-snakes-in-the-wilderness-numbers-214-9-john-314-21/>

Let us, wherever we find ourselves, look up to see God's wondrous love.

