

Sermon for Sunday, March 18, 2012 Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21 "Snakes, It Had to be Snakes."

As Indiana Jones said in "Raiders of the Lost Ark", "Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?" You remember the story from the movie: the archeologist Indiana Jones is on the trail of the lost Ark of the Covenant. While searching for it in Egypt, he digs down to a hidden chamber called the Well of Souls. When he holds a torch down to see what is in the chamber, the floor is a mass of writhing snakes. Indy is afraid of snakes, but he has to leap down to get the next clue as to the location of the ark. Thus his quote about the snakes. He has to face that which he fears to accomplish his goal.

Moses and his Israelites had a difficult goal, too.

Moses was leading those difficult, complaining people through the desert. They were experts at the art of complaining, and now their expertise had reached high art. They had worked their way up the scale from cranky to petulant to peevish to vile whining nit-pickers. Nothing that Moses did seemed to satisfy them.

Not only was Moses tired of their ill temper, God was, too. They were so aggravating that God sent a plague of poisonous snakes their way. The snakes did what snakes were best at, namely biting those who were annoying, so many of the Israelites died. Most likely some of the Israelites echoed the Indiana Jones

That got the Israelites' attention. A plague of snakes usually does. So they got down on their knees – a risky choice, since that put them closer to the snakes – and begged Moses to get God to save them from the snakes. So Moses prayed, and God did a very odd thing. He told Moses to make a snake and put it on a pole. Any Israelites who would be bitten by poisonous snakes could look at this artificial snake on a pole and live.

So Moses followed God's instruction and crafted a snake of bronze and put it on a pole, and, sure enough, it solved the snakebite problem.

God got their attention with those snakes. And he solved their problem – death by snakebite – and his problem – a bunch of complainers who forgot all God had done for them – in one fell swoop.

In a way, he solved their problem with their problem. He fixed the snake problem with a snake. They had to face their fear of snakes but getting up close and personal with that bronze snake.

Now, before I go any further, I want to talk a little bit about snakes in the Old testament, because we lose some of the nuance in the English translation. Snakes feature prominently in the Old Testament. The real biggie in snake stories in the Old Testament is of course the snake in the Garden of Eden. He's identified as the craftiest creature in the garden. Its name in Hebrew is *nahash*, and it is one of only two animals in the old testament that have the power of speech. The *nahash* is clever and troublesome, and is often interpreted as Satan, the great tempter. When we get to the story we hear in our Old Testament reading today, Moses and the poisonous serpents, it's those same *nahashot*, those crafty clever poisonous animals whom God cursed in Genesis. But when Moses follows God's orders and crafts that bronze snake, that creature is a *saraph*, a fiery creature...a serpent, like a fire-breathing dragon, the same word that has evolved into the name we give one of the classes of angels, the seraphim. Fiery protectors and avenging angels, those seraphim. On the face of it, when we hear the story in English, it sounds like Moses and God are solving the problem of snakes with a snake. But it's more complicated than that. The bronze serpent is something different. Maybe it's a serpent in form, but its purpose is very different, even holy. It is a serpent on a divine mission of healing, rather than serpents whose purpose is to destroy.

It sounds like a strangely endearing little tale from another time and place, nothing like what happens in our world, in our time, but that may not be true.

What are our snakes? Not literal snakes, but the things that bite us and make us feel the life ebbing from our hearts. What are the things that frighten us, that bedevil us, that cause us to feel our own mortality, our own powerlessness?

Don't we all whine and complain and talk about all that troubles us? Don't we wonder where God is, and why he doesn't seem to pay attention to our whining? We are snakebit by a thousand different things around us, and we struggle to fight against them. But fighting them seems to make them stronger. We need something else to take away the venom of those snakes in our lives.

And God hears us in our pain, in the place where we wander in our own personal deserts, and he comes us with something that we can grab onto, something that will remind us that he is with us and that he will heal our hurting hearts.

It's not a bronze serpent on a pole, that ancient talisman. It is something more important, more real, more powerful, than that snake on a stick that Moses made.

But it has a strange kinship with Moses' talisman – there is an image of divine power mounted on a high, visible place. God gives us his own Son, lifted high on the cross. The Gospel of John tells us about this, that God gave his the Son of Man lifted up high. It isn't a mere talisman, a magical symbol. It's God with us. His power is so great that it not only cures those snakebites, but gives us eternal life.

The snake that poisons us and hurts us is simply that – a hurtful creature. The bronze snake on the pole is a symbol of God's fiery power to help his people.

But the man who is God on the cross, that is not merely a symbol. It is real. It is God, in all God's power, saving his people. We have moved from a place where we need to see a talisman to where we can see God's ultimate gift of love to us.

But here's the hard part: to see the power and feel the power of the God who is willing to die on a cross for us, we have to face down our snakes of doubt and brokenness and fear and anger. We have to look at them and then recognize there is something that takes all their power away. And once we do that, we can see beyond them to that which is stronger than those snakes...the God who saves us from them all.

Amen.