

John 3:14-21 A Snake in the Desert
March 14, 2021

When my children were small, we took them camping once at a lake not too far from where we lived in Southern Illinois. Along the shore there were rocks from which one could fish. Jonathan, being too young to concentrate on fishing much, sat down to play among the rocks and when he did, we heard a sound that was eerily close to that of a rattlesnake. I picked him up, and sure enough, there was a rattler nestled down between the rocks where we were standing.

We left and went to the park headquarters to inform them of the presence of snakes and it turns out they already knew. They said there was an endangered species that had been introduced into the park to give it a habitat. I asked them if they thought maybe it would be good to make some signs informing campers of the presence of the snakes. They said they didn't want people to be alarmed. We never went back.

There is an interesting but rather obscure story in the Book of Numbers in which the Israelites indulged themselves in the universal human avocation of complaining. They did not do this because they were Israelites, but because they were human. As usual, they complained about their life in the desert; not enough food and water, too much time on the journey. Some of them were willing to return to slavery in Egypt.

In this particular case their punishment came when God brought poisonous snakes into their path, some were bitten and died. Moses prayed for the people, and God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Anyone who looked at the pole with the snake on it, after they had been bitten, would live.

I have read the Book of Numbers many times and don't remember this story. Interestingly, there is a reference to it in the Gospel of John, in the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus as it is given in the 3rd chapter. It is John 3:14 as a matter of fact, only two verses away from one of the most well-known texts in all the bible, John 3:16;

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever has faith in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.”

I have also read the Gospel of John many times and the text in chapter 3 even more, but strangely don't remember this reference. Makes me wonder what else I am missing. This time I saw it, and I realize that I am making a fuss about it.

The Israelites were in the middle of a wilderness journey. We like to think they were in a good place after their miraculous escape from Egypt, but I can imagine some of them might disagree, wilderness journeys are difficult. This incident with the snakes was a life and death matter and they were rightly concerned about it. There was a need for a miracle,

and that is what this snake in the desert was all about. All one had to do was look, and live.

Jesus associates this story from the Torah, as an illustration of his own situation, and the situation of Nicodemus, our situation. In Numbers, the story just moves on from this moment without breaking stride and the people end up in Moab doing battle against Kings Sihon and Og before moving on from there.

But we should take a little more time with it because Jesus is not talking about the Israelite journey through the Negev over 3,000 years ago, but about the universal journey of every person through life. Where does it lead? Is there a true home awaiting us?

The human race finds itself in a desperately precarious situation for which there is no human solution. It involves the questions of death and sin. For all our efforts we are unable to resolve the dilemma. These two questions, about mortality and sinfulness, are really just another way of asking the question of meaning. Is life meaningless, empty? Should we be pitied? Or is life meaningful, running over, as the 23rd Psalm says? Are we to be envied?

Jesus said, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, and whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” When I think of snakes, I don’t normally think of Jesus. Who knows, maybe that is the reason I have missed this reference.

Then Jesus goes on to the great verse we all know so well, and to engage the metaphor of light into darkness that is common in scripture. The world is a dark place, filled with danger and life in it is unsure. It is no wonder that people complain. But into that darkness, the divine light has shined.

It shows up the truth about the world and its people. The light exposes that people are excessively selfish, that in their attempts to find meaning and determine their own lives, they lose the very thing they are trying to find. Jesus understood that people would resist coming into the light *because* it exposes them. It exposes our weakness, of helplessness, our faithlessness.

But the light that exposes also cleanses, purifies and heals. “Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light.” There is no fear of exposure because the light turns out to be redemptive rather than destructive. Life is full of meaning *because God indwells it*.

Lent, this 4th Sunday, is an invitation into the light of grace. It means giving our full attention to the snake in the Desert, that is, the Son of Man lifted up, to the light shining in the darkness, and have the courage to step into the light, come what may, that we might learn the faith that leads to the salvation of our souls.

Amen.

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