

March 14, 2021

## Jesus, Lifted Up

Readings: **Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21; “A Talk with a Serpent”**, from *Ghostwritten*, by David Mitchell

Cultures are very strange things. They dictate what is normal human behavior and what is deviant, they tell us how to behave in certain situations, and what stories mean. Let me give you a couple of examples of what I’m talking about. When I was in Thailand, I learned to be very careful about where my feet were pointing when I wasn’t standing on them. Everything was fine as long as my feet never pointed at someone’s head. You’d never just lie back and stretch out your feet. You had to keep them tucked under you. The feet, you see, were the lowest part of the body and were considered dirty and disreputable, whereas the head was the highest part of the body, and contained the soul. It was insulting to point your feet at someone’s head, even by accident. This seems strange to us, that a body part could possibly have that much meaning, until we recall that we have similar beliefs about body parts, like, say, the middle finger and what showing that to someone else, another driver, maybe, might mean. Hmm!

Cultures tell us how to interpret actions, too, like whether politeness is a sign of respect, or just a bunch of phoniness that is a sign of disrespect. And cultures tell us how to understand stories, like whether the moral of the story of the boy who cried wolf is, “Never tell a lie,” or “Never tell the same lie twice.” Cultures are what enable us all to talk in shorthand about things that we all commonly understand. I can call someone “a real Benedict Arnold,” and everyone online here knows what I mean, except perhaps the very youngest, who might not know that Benedict Arnold was a hero of the Revolutionary War for betraying the secrets of the rebel Americans to the valiant British forces defending the king’s rightful claim to his American colonies. No, wait, we’re in America, so Benedict Arnold is not a hero, but a villain for betraying the secrets of the righteous Americans fighting for their liberty from the British occupiers denying them the right to govern their own futures. You see, culture offers us a shorthand way of getting ideas across, and also a perspective on the past that tells us what it all means. When we come across a foreign culture, we might be surprised by all that is tied up in its stories.

Our Old Testament reading for today is a case in point: It’s a strange story of snakes hissing across the Sinai peninsula, biting Israelites and sending them to their doom until Moses makes a bronze snake and puts it up on a pole for all to see. Anyone who was bitten by a snake and looked up at the bronze snake on the pole lived. It’s easy enough to dismiss the whole thing as an example of sympathetic magic from a less scientific age. Sympathetic magic is when you use a symbol of the thing to stand in for the real thing, and what you do to the symbol, you do to the real thing. The closest example we have in our culture would

be a voodoo doll, where sticking it with a pin is supposed to cause the person its modeled after to feel pain where the pin is.

But something else is going on here, on several levels. Remember, Israel has been brought out of Egypt by God's mighty hand and has been supplied by God during their trek in the wilderness. Instead of showing gratitude, the people grumble against God and Moses and say they are sorry they ever left Egypt and they would like to go back. So the Lord sends venomous snakes among them. Those who were bitten, die, but those who were bitten and look to the bronze snake God told Moses to make, live. Now that's weird, huh?

But we are not going to understand this story at all unless we know something about the culture of Egypt and of Israel. First we have to remember that pharaoh was the great ruler in Egypt. Pharaoh wore a snake, an asp, called the uraeus, on his headdress. It was from the power of Egypt and the persecution of pharaoh that the Israelites were fleeing. So venomous snakes, perhaps even asps, were a very graphic reminder that Egypt was not a safe place, not a place of refuge and comfort, but a place where they were slaves under pharaoh's whip. The symbolism is: going back to Egypt is like being bitten by a venomous snake. You don't want to do it. Don't forget what it was like back there, where the slave-drivers' whips stung like the worst bite of a snake. But more than that, of course.

In Hebrew culture, snakes were associated with Adam and Eve and the story of the garden of Eden. A snake was a symbol of temptation, sin and evil, of a fall from grace and a separation from God. When the people are bitten by snakes, it is a graphic sign that their grumbling against God is wickedness, succumbing to the temptation not to trust God in the wilderness in the same way that Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptation not to trust God in the garden. When the people look to the bronze snake on the pole, it is a symbol of trusting God to free them from the consequences of their sins, a symbol that God has skewered the snake, the evil one, the tempter from the garden, on a pole and restored safety and security to God's people. Those who would not look to God for salvation, who refused to look at the snake on the pole, who thought it was, perhaps, stupid and dumb, that it couldn't work, that it wouldn't work, that they could deal with the problem of the snakes themselves, inescapably died in their own stubbornness. But those who trusted in God and looked to the bronze snake God had provided as a symbol of that trust found renewed life and hope, and escape, not just from Egypt, the place of slavery to pharaoh, but from their sinful grumbling, the place of slavery to evil and wickedness.

This story, of course, points somewhere forward as well as backwards: according to Jesus, this story points to himself and will help us understand God's good news. In our gospel text this morning, Jesus told Nicodemus, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so must I be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in me might have eternal life." Jesus was referring to being lifted up on the cross, placed high on a pole for everyone to see. Jesus will be put on a pole, the cross, and lifted up so that everyone who is bitten by the snakes of sin can look to him and not die, but find eternal life through trust in God. In the Old

Testament story, the snake was a symbol of slavery to pharaoh and of slavery to sin. In the same way, when Jesus is lifted up, he takes on our slavery to the world and our slavery to sin. He takes our sins to the cross and bears them for us, and when he is impaled on that awful pole, our sins are impaled there with him. And in the same way, anyone who looks to Jesus will overcome being bitten by the snakes and live.

But do we live in a snake infested world? Well, not if you take snakes literally, of course, but when you consider what the snakes represent, I think we do. Snakes are temptations, grumbings, sin. When you are tempted to selfishness, there is a snake biting you. When you are tempted to lust, to greed, to envy, to discontent, you are surrounded by snakes. When our culture is full of lies and deceit in business, full of spin and falsehoods in politics, full of self-seeking and lust in movies, we are in the midst of a den of vipers.

Snakes are everywhere, from the little compromises which nip us in our daily lives to the out and out frauds of the financial system which have spread venom throughout our economy. Snakes harry us from appointment to appointment, chase us from home to work to home, around and around, snapping, biting, demanding our attention, trying to get us to look only at them and not at God. "There is no time for God," they say, "you only have time to watch for us. Money must be made, families supported, retirement saved for! No time, no time, no time! Hurry! Hurry! Rush! Rush! Race on! Don't stop for God, don't look to Christ, we're abroad and slithering, only time to look to us!" Sometimes we Christians get so caught up in pointing to snakes that the world thinks that is what Christianity is about: calling everything sin and making people feel guilty.

But of course that's not what it's about. We point to snakes because they are dangerous, and sometimes we and others will feel guilty because we realize that we have become snake breeders and snake feeders, bringing more snakes into the world. But Christianity isn't about the snakes, it's about the serpent on the pole. It's not about venomous death, it's about looking to God for salvation from death. Yes, we point to snakes – hey, they're still dangerous! -- but we should most of all point to Christ because he is the power of life for all who will look at him, for all who will trust God for their salvation. The snakes – sin – bring death with them, but Jesus lifted up on the cross brings eternal life.

As the Scripture says, "God did not send God's Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." And also, "For God so loved the world, that God gave God's one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." God has made it as easy as God could make it for us: look to Christ on the cross, dying for your snake bites, to make you whole. Follow Jesus, and you will live. Our culture has partly forgotten how to understand this story, why it is important to look to Christ. Our culture doesn't see the snakes, refuses to look at the vipers and the asps that bite us again and again, preferring to deny that there is any such thing as a snake, or to claim that we now know that playing with snakes is just good, harmless fun.

People are perishing because they won't acknowledge that they have been bitten, because they don't know where to look for help, because they think that a serpent on a pole is such a strange idea that it could never save anyone. But strange as it may be, Christ lifted up on the cross is the place to look for life in a snake-bitten world. When we look to Christ, we turn to God in trust and hope to cleanse the venom from our souls and to give us life. God doesn't want to condemn the world, desperately doesn't want to condemn it, to the point where God would send God's own Son to be lifted up on a cross for us. No! God loves the world with a parent's love for a wayward child. And God offers us life when we look to Christ.

May Jesus' words be fulfilled, and may everyone look to him when he is lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him might have eternal life. Don't look just at the snakes of sin and temptation or you will die; look to Jesus, lifted up, and live!