

The Serpent in the Wilderness

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fourth Sunday in Lent, March 9, 1997. Scripture Lessons: Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22, Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Snakes! Strange superstitions have been associated with snakes throughout history. For example, Africans on the island of Fernando Po worship the cobra. The cobra can do them good or harm, bestow riches or inflict disease and death. Annually, the discarded skin of a cobra is hung tail downwards from a branch of the highest tree in the public square. All children born within the past year are carried out and their hands made to touch the tail of the serpent's skin. By doing so the parents place their children under the protection of their cobra god. There's healing simply in the touching of uplifted serpent skin.

Some people in the ancient world associated snakes with death. Snakes creep out from underground holes and caves. They disappear again, mysteriously, into the earth and down into the world of the dead. Snakes are friendly with death. Some ancient peoples, though, associated snakes with life and healing. Asclepius was the god of healing in Greek mythology. The medical profession adopted his symbol, a snake entwined around a staff. Snakes also shed their skins. Ancient peoples saw this as a symbol of rebirth and new life. Snakes can be signs of healing and rebirth.

Some snakes are poisonous. They have two hollow fangs in their upper jaw like hypodermic needles. Each fang is connected to a venom gland. When a poisonous snake bites, it injects venom through its fangs. Cobras frequently hang onto their victim and chew, forcing more venom into the wound. Enzymes in the venom begin the process of digestion even before the snake begins to swallow the animal. Snake venom also contains poison. The poison attacks the nervous system.

Breathing becomes difficult. Swallowing becomes difficult. The work of the heart becomes disrupted. The poison damages blood vessels and body tissues.

Get bitten by a poisonous snake faces and your faced with a life threatening situation. The area around the bite begins to swell and turn purple. You become pale, weak, and sick to the stomach. Your pulse becomes weak and rapid. Eventually your lungs become partly paralyzed and you become sleepy.

In Boy Scouts we were taught to make snakebite victims remain motionless and quiet. Activity increases the rate at which the poison spreads. Apply a tourniquet! Sterilize a knife in a flame! Make a cross shaped cut above the bite! Let the blood flow out freely. And then, if you don't have any sores in your mouth, suck the wound and spit out the venom. Keep doing that until help arrives.

There's a bizarre story in the Old Testament about deadly snake bites. The story raises lots of questions for modern, scientifically oriented men and women. It's a strange story. Rationalists discount the story. But I'm not a rationalist. I believe there's more to human existence than what reason and science can tell us. As valuable as reason and science are, rationalism robs the world of wonder and destroys mystery.

But the story in the Old Testament book of Numbers isn't meant to give us scientific information about how to get healed from deadly snakebites. The story tells us about our gracious and mysterious God. God sent poisonous snakes to bite the ungrateful Israelites whom God had delivered from slavery in Egypt. But God also provided the healing remedy for the bites. God instructed Moses, "'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten

shall look at it and live.' So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live."

In the Gospel of John we're told that the story about the snakes in the wilderness is really about the God who has come to us in Christ. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." The story is not about how to get healed from poisonous snake bites. The story is how, through Christ's death, we get rid of all the deadly venom within us.

All of us are snake bite victims. Samuel Johnson wrote, in his life of Boswell, "Every desire is a viper in the bosom, who, when he was chill, was harmless; but when warmth gave him strength, exerted it in poison." All our desires are good. But our good desires can be perverted and become poisonous. Hatred is a poisonous venom. Prejudice is a deadly poison. Ingratitude, greed, lust, and slothfulness are like deadly poisons. Deadly venom paralyzes us, keeps us from doing what we know we ought to do. Keeps us from saying, "I'm sorry." Keeps us from saying, "I love you." Poisonous venom will eventually kill us - unless, somehow, we can get rid of it.

But when the gospel of God's love in Christ is lifted up among us it draws out all the venom. James F. Kay, professor of preaching at Princeton Seminary, writes "the Son of God is lifted up on a cross planted in a snake pit." Some of us feel like we work in a snake pit, in our factory or business. The school class room can be a snake pit. Sometimes our homes can become snake pits of grumbling and ingratitude.

And the uplifted Christ says to us, "Look at me hanging here for you. It takes a cross shaped cut to draw out the venom. The blood

must flow freely. Lifted up here on the cross I've taken upon myself all the world's deadly venom. I can heal it. I can heal you. I am the way the world is healed. Get rid of your venom. Trust me. Let all the venom go. Let everything go that poisons your lives. Let it all go."

Look on the cross and believe in him who loves us and gave himself for us? Let go of all the stored up venom that's killing you, just let it go. The good news is that Christ can take it all; all the years of stored up venom. Christ can take all the poison and bear it all away. In Christ, God has chosen to live with us in the snake pit. In Christ, God has chosen to heal the poisoned and the perishing.

When we hear John 3:16, through the story of the snakes and the cross we can do one of two things. We can either look away from the cross and, bottling up all the poison that's in us, simply perish; or, look to the cross and, letting loose our deadliest venom, we can begin to live anew.

So let it go. Let it all go. Let all the venom go! For the promise of the gospel story is this: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

"Thanks be to God!"

Let us pray: Almighty God: you have lifted up our Lord Jesus from death into life eternal, and set him over people and nations. Remove the poison from our lives and everything that seeks to harm us and the world you so much love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

For the ending of the sermon I am indebted to James F. Kay, Seasons of Grace: Reflections from the Christian Year, pages 51f.