

# March 22, 2009

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## 4th Sunday in Lent

### Lessons

RCL	Num 21:4-9	Eph 2:1-10	Jn 3:14-21
Roman Catholic	2 Chr 36:14-16, 19-23	Eph 2:4-10	Jn 3:14-21
Episcopal (BCP)	2 Chr 36:14-23	Eph 2:4-10	Jn 6:4-15

### Speaker's Introductions for the Lessons:

#### Lesson 1

- **Numbers 21:4-9 (RCL):** The Hebrew people learn about both God's anger and God's compassion, after they are sent a plague of snakes in punishment for complaining about Moses' leadership.
- **2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23 (RC); 36:14-23 (Epis):** The chronicler attributes the conquest of Judah and destruction of the Temple by the armies of Babylon in 587 BCE to God's finally losing patience with their unwillingness to heed prophetic warnings about repentance.

#### Lesson 2

- **Ephesians 2:1-10 (RCL); 2:4-10 (RC/Epis):** The author (Paul?) contrasts his readers' sinful state before they heard the gospel with their new life, saved by the gift of God's grace in Christ.

### Gospel

- **John 3:14-21 (RCL/RC):** John uses the Old Testament story of the plague of snakes in the wilderness as a narrative frame for his understanding of Christ's atonement for human sin.
- **John 6:4-15 (Epis):** In John's account of the feeding of the multitude – the only miracle reported in all four Gospels – Jesus offers a sign/parable to teach the extravagance of God's all-inclusive hospitality.

## Theme

Jesus as remedy for sin

## Thought for the Day

“We know no Gospel without salvation from sin.”

- John Wesley

## Sermon Summary

As in the story of the poisonous snakes sent by God upon the complaining Israelites, for which God sends the remedy of a bronze snake-on-a-pole, so also in the story of human sin, God sends the remedy of his Son lifted-up-on-the-cross.

## Call to Worship

**One:** O give thanks to the Lord, who is good.

**All:** God's steadfast love endures forever.

**One:** Some wandered, far and near, and cried out for help – which came from God.

**All:** God's steadfast love endures forever.

**One:** Some sat in darkness; some rebelled; they cried out for help – which came from God.

**All:** God's steadfast love endures forever.

**One:** We come now to worship the God who saves through love:

**All:** God's steadfast love endures forever!

– From Psalm 107:1, 4-7, 10-15

## Pastoral Prayer

As we follow your Son to Jerusalem, O God, we thank you for loving us – even us, who consistently and perversely stray from that singular path. In times when we've turned our eyes everywhere but to you, you remind us to look up to where you have lifted your Son on the cross, to bring us to new life. For this gift, far beyond what we dare to ask or hope to deserve, we offer humble thanks and focused praise. No matter how long the road, or how far we may deviate from your path, we trust in your unfailing presence and care; under the Mercy who is Christ our Lord. Amen.

## **Prayer of Confession**

If the sin has a name, we've committed it – as you well know, all-suffering God. We know, in your grace, that you have set before us a clear path to follow your Son, but we persist in leaving that road, enticed by the promised pleasures of the undergrowth, far happier to pursue our own devices and desires than to stay beside Jesus. Forgive us, we pray, for our pernicious straying. Hold your Son's cross ever before us, that we may learn anew the height and depth and breadth of your love for us; under the mercy of him who died that we might live, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## **Prayer of Dedication of Gifts and Self**

**One:** To you, O God, we offer our gifts.

**All:** From you, O God, all blessings flow.

**One:** To you, O God, we offer our worship.

**All:** From you, O God, all creatures live and move and are created.

**One:** To you, O God, we dedicate all that we have and all that we are,

**All:** And go from you, O God, out into the world to live as your disciples; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## **Hymn of the Day**

**“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” (HY; ELW; NCH; PH; UMH; VU)**

This text describes God's perfect love; it also asks that God will continue to work in us to make us truly new. Written by Charles Wesley, it has a disarming way of being very personal in its approach to God, yet its corporate language gives it great strength. It is a hymn for any time in worship with special effectiveness as a closing hymn. There are two tunes commonly paired to this text. **BEECHER**, by John Zundel, was named for Henry W. Beecher, a Brooklyn pastor. It is a straight forward, energetic tune. **HYFRYDOL**, by Rowland H. Prichard, is a sweeping, melodic tune. The ebb and flow of the melody work particularly well with this text, especially in the last line of the final stanza.

## Children's Time

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### God Loves the Whole World

*Bring a globe.* Spin it around. Ask, “Where do God’s people live? Do they live in Mexico? (*Point out Mexico.*) Do they live in Argentina? (*Point out Argentina.*) Do they live in China? (*Point out China.*) Do they live in Tanzania? (*Point out Tanzania.*) God’s people live all around the world. Christians around the world have many different ways of getting ready for Easter. In Lebanon (*point this out*), on Palm Sunday children hold fancy candles while they are carried on their parents’ shoulders. In Germany (*point this out*), during Lent they decorate their homes with twigs, willow branches, and wheat sprouts. In Belgium (*point this out*) they build big bonfires the first Sunday in Lent. And in Mexico on Fridays in Lent they eat a dessert made of crusty rolls, raisins, tomatoes, onions, and brown sugar. During Lent, Christians around the world get ready for Easter. In the Bible, in the book of John, is a verse that reminds us what Easter means for people all around the world. Repeat each line after me:

For God so loved the world  
That he gave his only Son,  
So that everyone who believes in him  
May not perish  
But may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

## The Sermon

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### The Good Snake: An Image of God’s Grace

#### Scripture: John 3:14-21

(For sermon materials on John 3:14-21, see the November/December 2008 issue of *The Clergy Journal*; for sermon materials on Ephesians 2:1-10, see the 2008 May/June planning issue of *The Clergy Journal*.)

“Eeeewww! Something is moving inside my desk!” Arms laden with books, I had just returned with my third grade classmates from a trip to the town library. Raymond, the boy whose desk was just behind mine, was

snickering in a way that should have aroused my suspicion. But I, being myself, needed to find out what sort of creature the intruder might be.

I lifted the lid. Piece by piece, I dropped the contents of my desk onto the floor. By this time, the teacher, Mrs. Steele, had joined the crowd of interested bystanders. “Pretty messy desk, isn’t it?” she observed. Suddenly, there, behind my math book, I discovered two small-beady-unblinking eyes. “I thought so; a snake!” I concluded to myself, “and Raymond must have put it there!” No way was I going to let Raymond make me scream. But then, without warning, the snake lunged its way to the front of the desk. I let out an involuntary shriek. With a look of infinitely smug satisfaction, Raymond casually picked up the reptile as if this were something he did all the time. Dangling it in front of my face, he declared for all to hear, “You’re such a *girl!* Only a *girl* would be afraid of a little garter snake!”

As I recall the scene – which took place more than 45 years ago – once Raymond and everyone else had stopped laughing at my expense, Mrs. Steele told Raymond to take the hapless creature outside and release it in the playground. Then, he was to march his very human self off to the principal’s office, where she hoped he would come suitably to rue his misdeed.

When all was said and done, Raymond had hidden the snake. But I got the remedy – and a clean desk, to boot! (And never, *ever again* was there a mess in my desk where anything could hide!)

I don’t know about you, but snakes are not my favorite creatures. Snakes are lodged in the same prehistoric, fright-laden parts of our brains as cockroaches, spiders, ants, slugs, crocodiles, eels, bats, and rats. Most of us would do fine without them, thank you very much, God. And so, we should not be too surprised when we find that, like us, the children of Israel have a deathly fear of snakes.

The 21st chapter of Numbers contains a curious story. The Israelites have left Egypt, under Moses’ leadership, and have been wandering around, far longer than any of them expected. They are complaining about the food God has provided – manna. “At least in Egypt, we could go to McDonald’s once in a while!” they grumble. They challenge Moses and infuriate God. God is so angry that he decides to teach these smart-aleck Hebrews a lesson or two. God sends venomous snakes to bite the Hebrews. Many are attacked. Many die.

It doesn’t take long – *Duh!* – for the people to get the message. They go crying to Moses to find them relief. When Moses approaches God and

offers their remorse, God refuses to take the snakes away. Instead, God tells Moses to make a serpent out of bronze and set it atop a pole in the midst of the encampment. Those who are bitten by snakes can look up at the bronze serpent, and they will live.

God sends the *means* of death, for very good reasons. Yet God also sends the *antidote* for death, as a sign of acceptance of the Hebrews' repentance. One snake kills. Another offers life.

This story is the one Jesus refers to when Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, comes, under cover of darkness, to question Jesus. (Slithering, perhaps?) Jesus has told Nicodemus that "*no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above*" (John 3:3). He elaborates on this theme by recalling the story from Numbers 21: "*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*" (John 3:14-15). Comparing his own role to that of the snake-on-a-pole, Jesus offers himself as God's antidote for sin.

The incontrovertible truth is, human beings are utterly guilty of sin. But God has taken pity on those condemned by sin, and offers them Jesus to counteract sin's poison. Jesus will himself be "lifted up" on the cross, providing a once-for-all remedy to whom all people can look for pardon, for redemption, for eternal life. "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

At God's command, Moses takes the evil, the source of fear, and turns it into a dark, mysterious symbol of salvation. In the hands of God, there in Numbers, God's people are punished, but God's people are also saved by the snake. We cannot explain why, but we feel the story's power.

This is what C. S. Lewis calls "Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time," the power by which the great lion Aslan is saved from death in the first volume of Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, a story ostensibly for children called *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; the power that is able to overcome the supposed supremacy of Jadis the White Witch, which is called "Deep Magic from the Dawn of Time." This power shows itself in the Gospel according to John, where Jesus is revealed as both the Good Shepherd and the Good Snake. Until we encounter this strange saving power, we are very apt to look upon the mystery of what Jesus offers us as just another garter snake, placed in the desk by a mischievous classmate as a prank.

We don't know what it means, and maybe that's the point: to bring us to the realization that we can't transform God into a more pleasing image.

We don't know what it means, and so we are challenged to see Jesus as one who comes to us with not only good things, but also with biting words, to surprise us with the truth about ourselves.

We don't know what it means. And so we go through 40 days of Lent, talking about, identifying, learning about sin, in order for there to be salvation.

A snake in a desk.

A plague of snakes.

A snake as antidote.

A Savior as Antidote.

Jesus the Good Shepherd is also Jesus the Good Snake. Look upon the one who is lifted up for our sakes. Risk following him, and be saved.

This is our faith, under the Mercy.

– Nancy E. Topolewski

## **Hymns**

### **Opening Hymn:**

“How Great Thou Art,” “Lift High the Cross”

### **Sermon Hymn:**

“A Ruler Once Came to Jesus by Night”

“Lamb of God (Your Only Son, No Sin to Hide)”

### **Closing Hymn:**

“Would I Have Answered When You Called”

“Freely, Freely Have You Received”