

SNAKE ON A POLE

TEXT: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:11-17

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on April 3, 2022

An important life hack in dealing with recurring problems is to ask new questions. Old questions give us the answers we've always gotten, which may or may not serve us. New questions give us new answers and new perspectives that can make a big difference. Asking new questions is also an important tool in Bible study. Since writing *New Vision for an Old Story* in 2018, I've been trying to flesh out what a story-based approach to the Bible looks like on a more granular level. That means I'm asking questions of the biblical text that I never used to ask before, which means I'm learning new things. And this week I learned a new thing about an old story! So, you get to hear about it.

We're still out in the wilderness with the Israelites as they try to move from being an enslaved people in Egypt to the free people of God headed for the Promised Land. Most of that story is in Exodus, but there are also some additional stories from that journey in the book of Numbers. I had planned for some time to talk about this odd story about poisonous snakes from Numbers 21 during Lent. I've preached on it quite a few times because, as strange as it is, it's one of the few stories from the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus not only references, but compares himself to. If Jesus is comparing his crucifixion to a snake on a pole in the book of Numbers, we should pay attention.

I've always connected those two stories, because Jesus himself does. But having a narrative approach to the Bible as a whole has made me come back to them with some new questions, and the first one was: "Okay, are there other stories about snakes in the Bible? Is the snake a recurring character in the Bible's over-arching story? How might other snake stories inform how we interpret this one?" Well, duh...one of the earliest and most famous stories in the entire Bible involves a crafty snake convincing Adam and Eve to try a bit of fruit. So, I put that in my snake-story basket. Are there more? Wait! There's not only another snake story; there's another snake story involving Moses!

When we talked about the story of Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3, we were focused on God's name. But the encounter covers much more than that. In Exodus 4, Moses is getting the details of how he is going to prove to Pharaoh that God has sent him. While still at the bush, God tells Moses to throw his shepherd's staff down on the ground. When Moses does that, it turns into...a snake! God then tells Moses to pick the snake up by its tail. Moses does that, too, and the snake turns back into a staff again.

This exercise at the bush is practice for one of the signs Moses is going to perform in front of Pharaoh in chapter 7. When Moses does perform this sign before Pharaoh, Pharaoh's court magicians come forward and do the same thing. They throw down their staves and they, too, become snakes. Seems like a stalemate, but then, in a real boss move, Moses' snake swallows all the other snakes. So there, Pharaoh!

But now, with this new snake story at hand, I had another question. If Moses turning his staff into a snake is a sign meant to convince Pharaoh to liberate his entire labor force, snakes must have meant something important to him. But what? And...wait! Isn't there usually a cobra in the middle of the headdress of Egyptian kings and queens? Why, yes, yes there is! What did a cobra mean to Pharaoh?

As it turns out, the Egyptian deity believed to be the protector of Egypt's rulers was a cobra goddess named Wadjet. So, Moses' staff becoming a snake is a sign that Moses, also, is a king of Egypt, protected by Wadjet. And then his snake swallowing the others proclaims Moses as the greater king. That encounter in Exodus 7 between Moses and Pharaoh—between a shepherd king coming to liberate his people and the

king holding them hostage—has a parallel to the threat posed to King Herod when the Good Shepherd many called “King of the Jews” stood before him—a king about to deliver a different kind of liberation.

But it gets even better. The cobra goddess Wadjet was believed to be not only the protector of kings, but the protector of women in childbirth. Why? Well, the story goes that the goddess Isis, one of the greatest deities of Egypt and seen as the mother of Pharaoh, had to hide her son Horus in the Nile river to protect him from Set, the god of destruction and chaos. But Isis was a very busy goddess; and while she was out working miracles, like raising her slain brother and husband Osiris from the dead, someone had to watch over baby Horus hidden in the Nile. That someone was the cobra goddess, Wadjet. Horus, the falcon god, became equated with the kings of Egypt, and every new Pharaoh was a manifestation of Horus.

So, Moses’ snake trick before Pharaoh and his court evokes all of those stories for them. It’s a direct equation of Moses with Pharaoh, as both of their mothers hid them in the Nile. Moses was saved and raised by Pharaoh’s daughter, and thus Wadjet protected them both. Both are kings. And Moses is the legitimate Pharaoh, the legitimate manifestation of Horus, since Wadjet, sides with Moses and swallows the other snakes. Believe me, that sign meant something to Pharaoh. Now it’s not just a negotiation about freeing the Israelites. Now, in Pharaoh’s eyes, it’s a fight for the throne.

By the time Moses is chatting with God at the burning bush, the Israelites have been in Egypt for centuries. They knew what the cobra goddess meant to Egyptians. But mixed in with that would have been the ancient stories of their own people about a snake in the Garden of Eden. There it was not a protector, but the symbol of the sin that brought death into the world. And Egyptian and Israelite alike would have been all too familiar with the very real and very deadly Egyptian cobra, whose bite can take out an elephant in a mere three hours.

In that context, let’s revisit the events in Numbers 21. The people complain to God and Moses about the conditions of life in the desert and get bitten by poisonous snakes for their trouble. Seen as punishment by God, the people run to Moses: “Okay, okay, we’re sorry! Now ask God to get rid of these snakes. We’re dying out here!” God tells Moses to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. If the people will go look at that snake on a pole, they will be healed from the poison. And it works. What seems to us like an odd choice of healing objects was, for the Israelites, the perfect symbol of sin, death, protection, and the authority given by God to Moses. So why is Jesus talking about it? We need to stay in Numbers to notice one more thing.

God does not give the people what they ask for. God does not take away the snakes. God doesn’t even make them less deadly. Sin has consequences, and the Israelites have to live with theirs just like we have to live with ours. They can’t just sin, say they’re sorry because they don’t like the consequences, and get God to take away the snakes. But all is not lost; there is still a way to be healed. To escape death, they have to be willing to face down what they did and acknowledge why they’re in this mess in the first place. They have to look at what bit them and remember why. Then, and only then, is healing granted. Every time another snake bites—back they have to go to the pole to be healed. That may sound familiar. It’s the first ten of the twelve steps, right there in a snake on a pole. It provided training in repentance and it went with the Israelites all the way to the Promised Land.

About a thousand years later, we meet the story again, when Jesus brings it up in a late-night conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus in John 3:14-15: “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.” That then leads into one of the most famous verses in the entire Bible, John 3:16, “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.”

The surprise here is that Jesus is comparing himself to the snake on the pole and not to Moses. Jesus associates himself with the one being lifted up—with the snake, who was at once the protector, healer, and the reminder of sin’s consequence. I think Jesus is saying that his crucifixion will serve the same core

function as the snake on the pole. Both are terrifying things to look at. Neither would exist if there had not been sin; and both embody the punishment for sin that was levied all the way back with the snake in the Garden: Death. Mortality.

By associating his crucifixion with Moses' snake on a pole, Jesus evokes all of those stories, implying that the way back from death to life is the same in both places: We have to go look our sin in its deathly face. We have to be willing to recognize what we've done and where that will lead if we don't change our behavior. That's what repentance means. It literally means to change. It's not about saying we're sorry, although that's a start. It's about proving our remorse by changing our behavior, permanently and over time, as we are forced to look again and again at the dreadful consequences if we don't. That is what leads us from death back to life. That is the truth of both stories.

Like with the Ten Commandments, we tend to interpret these stories through the lens of individual behavior. And certainly, it applies to us as individuals. But the Bible is always first concerned with creating a just and peaceful society. Our individual behaviors are important because they are needed to achieve that end. We each have our own sins as individuals that we need to acknowledge and our own behaviors that we need to change in order to reap the fruit of forgiveness and healing. But we also need to recognize that the Bible's message is primarily aimed at transforming the larger groups of communities, tribes, and nations.

Those bodies have their own corporate sins that must be faced to bring peace and justice to the land; and we don't have to look far to find them. States and communities around the country are currently spending incredible amounts of energy trying to pass laws that keep children from looking at our nation's sins. If we actually connected the dots between centuries of white supremacy and colonialism and today's deadly consequences of those horrific sins, we could be healed. But it's too uncomfortable for too many to look; and to make sure we aren't forced to look, our children can't be allowed to ask difficult questions.

We want God just to take away the snakes that are killing us. Don't make us actually face what we've done or require us to do the hard work of repentance and making things right. Don't make us have to change in order to be forgiven. Can't we just forget it now and move on? How about if we just ban the books and silence the teachers? That will make everything fine again, right? And, God, you'll just fix the planet and take away the consequences of our greedy destruction, won't you? We don't need to do anything differently...no change in our lifestyle needed, right? No need to look at deadly snakes wrapped around poles or the twisted body of a Middle Eastern Jew tortured on a cross. Away with you, unsightly visage! We'll pass laws against such reminders!

As long as we refuse to look; as long as we choose comfort over truth; the poisonous violence that our sin has let loose in the world will continue to kill us all. But the good news of the gospel is that we do have another choice. There is a way back to the Garden; a way to transmute death into life; a way to find healing every time the viper of our sin injects its poison into our lives and into our world. How? We can face it, head on. We can admit what we have done and do the hard work to chart a different course. We can take into ourselves the broken body and shed blood and allow it to change us that the world might live. Amen.