

“Lift High the Cross”

“Snakes, why did it have to be snakes?” so said Indiana Jones.¹ Perhaps his ancestors were among the Hebrews during the Exodus. Snakes are an odd subtext to today’s readings. I suspect that if we had not had the gospel reading paired with the Numbers reading most of us would have overlooked what Jesus says at the beginning of the Gospel. After all, contained in the gospel reading is one of the most famous verses in the Bible. It is one I learned from memory in Vacation Bible School ages ago. It is the verse that is on the sign that the guy with the rainbow wig holds up in the end zone at football games—John 3:16. The King James version as I remember it, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

Really why pay attention to the weirdness about serpents being lifted up in the wilderness when you have a verse of such sublime poetry and great promise of salvation? “Snakes, we don’t need no stinking snakes,” to paraphrase a line from another famous movie.² We need beauty, salvation, and something easily understood and memorable. But as with most things in life, if we go deeper we get a more profound understanding of what is promised in the easily remembered bits. We get a sense of understanding that enriches and grounds us in the simple and sublime and memorable.

Why in the world would Jesus go back to this creepy scene from the Exodus to talk about his coming crucifixion? Especially as I have heard so many people say that we have no need for the Old Testament.³ Yet, as I will contend until my dying day, without the Old Testament you cannot have the New Testament. This is not just a tautology. Jesus tells us more than once that he and his ministry are the fulfilment of what is written in the Law and the Prophets (that is another way of saying the Hebrew Bible⁴) Without the Old Testament what does Jesus fulfill?

It is even more important in this instance because Jesus knows he is speaking to a Jewish scholar. Nicodemus, who is unnamed in the portion of John read today, is called a “leader of the Jews.” His is a member of the Sanhedrin which is the governing body of the Jews. Nicodemus knows his Bible. Thus Jesus makes reference to the Book of Numbers to explain his mission to the people of Israel. What’s more he picks a story that has echoes from the creation story. He is taking Nicodemus on a biblical tour of sin and redemption.

Jesus’ selection of the story of the plague of the serpents is not accidental. Prior to this story the people of Israel who have left Egypt, crossed the Reed Sea, camped at Sinai, and received the Ten Commandments are now on what will become their forty-year-journey through the Wilderness to the Promised Land. As they have done before the people are murmuring, that is grumbling, against God and Moses (in the Bible murmuring always presages something bad). Their refrain throughout this section of their journey is, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”⁵ In modern terms you might say that they are “hangry”⁶ God gets put out with their murmuring and sends a plague of serpents to attack and kill them. When they cry out for mercy God instructs Moses to make a bronze serpent on a pole and lift it above the people. If one is bit by a serpent and looks upon the bronze serpent he or she will live.

Before I jump forward to the gospel let’s jump backward in the Old Testament. Thinking of serpents what is the most famous passage in the Old Testament with regard to a serpent? That is correct, the temptation of Eve by the serpent in the Garden of Eden. There are several results of that temptation. What are they? (Listen for: expulsion from the garden, man toils for food, women labor in childbirth, the serpent crawls on its belly, and there will be enmity between the serpent and humanity). That last one is the key. From nearly beginning of creation people and serpents do not get along. There is enmity between the two.

Therefore when Jesus mentions the bronze serpent Nicodemus immediately without having to think knows that serpents are his enemy from the time of creation. Serpents attacked

and killed many of his people during the Exodus. The cure for that plague was the lifting up of a bronze serpent, but the cure worked only if one looked upon the serpent.

With all of this already in the conscious and subconscious of Nicodemus, Jesus tells him that the Son of Man must be lifted up for the salvation of all. That is The Son of Man will be lifted up in crucifixion like the bronze serpent, and all who look upon him will be receive salvation. The lifting up of Jesus is much more than the cure for a snake bite. His lifting up is curative for all sin back to the very first sin of disobedience to God.

God was disappointed with the first humans who disobeyed in the Garden. Thus God banished them and gave them toil as their punishment. God was disappointed with the murmuring crowds in the Wilderness and sicced serpents upon them. But God never ever stopped loving these people. Think of your children or those you deeply love. They may disappoint you. They may hurt you. They may abandon you. But you do not stop loving them. If you and I can do that how much more is God able to love? God is love.⁷ God is unfathomable, unconditional, and unending love.

God loves the world. That is God loves all of creation even me, even you. No matter how much we fail. No matter how worthless the world makes us feel. No matter what, God all of us. And the implicit commandment is that we love each other.

What's more, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." God's love is a yearning love. It is a love that is ever calling us back from the abyss. It is a love that forgives our worst offenses and embraces us once again.

You may ask how can God forgive the awful things I have done or the awful things that others have done to me? That is an age old question that no human can answer except to say that God's love, being greater than anything that you or I can imagine or even hint at, is the most powerful thing in the universe. Even the hardest heart cannot defeat it. Some have said that a person can defeat God's love by not accepting it. But, I believe that God's love is so powerful, and God is so determined and patient that nothing, not even, my denial of it can stop it. Sooner or later God will get us. Even those who prefer the darkness to the light will one day see the light of God's love and be swept off of their feet into the eternal love that draws all to of creation to the creator. We can try our hardest to turn our backs or run away. We can do things that shame us and we want to keep in the dark. God knows it all and loves us not just in spite of our failings and flaws but because of and in them.

God's love conquers all. May I humbly suggest that we each stop fighting with God and let that love flow in us and through us and out of us to all of creation. As the Psalmist wrote:

Let us give thanks to the LORD for his mercy *
and the wonders he does for his children.

...

and tell of his acts with shouts of joy.

¹ *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*. 1981

² *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, "Badges? We don't need no stinking badges."

³ I will use Hebrew Bible and Old Testament interchangeably recognizing they are not necessarily equivalent but in order to help the reader and listener remember the origins of these scriptures.

⁴ The Hebrew Bible is divided into three sections—Torah, Nevi'im, Khetuvim that is Law, Prophets and Writings.

⁵ Numbers 21:5

⁶ Bad-tempered or irritable as a result of hunger. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/hangry>

⁷ 1 John 4:8