

## Lifted Up

There is something weird going on in our scripture readings for today—something weird involving snakes. Now, most of us don't like snakes very much. In fact, psychological research suggests that fear of snakes is one of those built-in, instinctive human fears, like fear of falling—fear of snakes is something that cuts across lines of race and culture and conditioning as a pretty nearly universal human phenomenon. Of course there *are* some people who like snakes, who keep snakes as pets, who make careers out of herpetology—but if you've ever seen other people's reactions to those who say they like snakes, you might get the idea that they're the exception that proves the rule. Most of us just don't like snakes.

And our dislike of snakes gets reflected in all kinds of stories and legends and mythologies and religion from around the world. There are myths from many cultures in which snakes are the “bad guys,” or at least are creatures of highly questionable character. Perhaps the most well-known snake in all religious literature is the snake in the Garden of Eden, who was wily and crafty, and who deceived the woman into eating the fruit that she and the man were not supposed to eat, and who got us all into the mess we are now in. Religiously, mythologically, psychologically, personally, most of us really don't like snakes.

Which is what makes it weird to find snakes playing such a prominent role in our scripture readings for this Fourth Sunday in Lent. And what makes it even weirder is the way the snakes *change their meaning* as the stories go on.

We see snakes first today in the First Testament reading, a passage from Numbers that tells a story from the wilderness wandering of the Israelites. In this story, the Israelites are actually getting close to the Land of Promise. They've been on the road for decades now, and they are approaching Canaan; but Edom is in the way, and the Edomites are not friendly to them, so they're going to take a detour around Edomite territory. And on that detour the people get impatient—as they seem to do an awful lot in these wilderness wandering stories—and they begin to grumble against Moses for bringing them out into this foodless wasteland, and they begin to grumble against God because they're tired of eating manna, and they generally make a pain of themselves. So God sends poisonous snakes among them, and many of the Israelites are bitten, and some of the Israelites die. And when the people realize what they've brought upon themselves, they go to Moses, and they ask forgiveness, and God tells Moses to make a bronze effigy of a snake and put it up on a pole so that everyone can see it, and whoever looks at the snake will be healed of their poisonous bites. So Moses lifted up the bronze serpent; and according to later stories, the people carried that serpent image with them through the rest of their wanderings, and eventually they brought it to Jerusalem, and they put it in the Temple, and they made it part of their regular Temple worship of God.

Now, there are several things about that story that strike me as kind of weird. There are lots of stories in Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers where the people grumble, and God punishes them, and they repent, and God heals them. That part's nothing new. But in most of those stories, when God heals the people God does it *directly*, by declaring it or by sending a miracle like manna or like drinkable water gushing out from a rock. This is the only such story I know where God heals the people *indirectly*, through an instrument, through the image of a snake set up on a pole. But why would God heal through an image? In the Ten Commandments God tells the people *not* to make such images; now God tells Moses he's *supposed* to make an image. It seems a little weird. And why that particular image? If snakes are poisonous and evil, why use one as a sign of healing? But of course that in turn reminds me that there are other myths and legends where poisonous snakes become signs of healing. There is the Ouroboros, the image of a snake with its tail in its mouth, the creature whose end is also its beginning, and who is therefore a sign of eternity. There's the fact that snakes cast their skins, leaving behind an empty form in order to grow anew—and therefore in some cultures snakes are symbols of the renewal of life and of immortality. And of course in Greek mythology there is the symbol of the snake twined around the pole, the caduceus, which is a sign of healing and medical arts that we still use today. Moses' bronze serpent on a pole is one of a whole range of symbols where poisonous and deadly snakes are lifted up as signs of healing and wholeness and well-being. This weird little story from Numbers in fact invites us into a deepening paradox about what is deadly being transformed into life.

And the paradox deepens further still when we come to the Gospel for today. Speaking to Nicodemus—who *wants* to understand Jesus but still isn't really getting it—Jesus makes explicit reference to the Numbers story, saying “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.” After we get over the initial shock of Jesus comparing himself to a *snake*, this saying pulls us right into the mystery of something deadly becoming a source of life. Jesus says he must be “lifted up”—and in John's

Gospel, whenever Jesus speaks of being “lifted up” he seems to mean two things: *both* crucifixion *and* resurrection, *both* being lifted up on the cross to die *and* being lifted up to God in eternal life. Being “lifted up” is a paradox, the paradox of the cross, the paradox of an instrument of shameful and excruciating death being turned into the way of everlasting life. The paradox of the cross takes up and completes, as it were, the paradox of the snake: both of them point us to the mystery of how God’s love can enter into even the most poisonous, the most deadly, the most painful parts of our lives and transform them into possibilities for healing and wholeness and well-being and peace and compassion and wisdom and love.

And we today are invited—we are *called*—to witness that mystery lifted up in our lives, too. Some time ago I heard a woman speak to a group of people about her experience as a survivor of child sexual abuse. She told us that when she was abused as a teenager she felt shamed by it, she felt polluted, she felt poisoned by it, as if it made her the kind of person who would *always* be hurt by other people, as if it made her the kind of person who *deserved* to be hurt by other people. She said that in order to cope with all her feelings she internalized a victim identity—although of course she didn’t learn to call it that until much later—and that victim identity left its poisonous mark on all the relationships she had. She said that for a long time she wouldn’t let people get close to her, because she *knew* they were going to hurt her; she said she wouldn’t trust people, because she *knew* they would fail to protect her and would let her down; she said she wouldn’t allow herself to feel love for anyone, because she *knew* love was dangerous, and would lower her defenses, and would make her a victim all over again. She told us that she lived that way for many years—until with the help of a good therapist, and some good friends, and a supportive church community, and a lot of inner work, she learned she could think about herself in a different way, not as a *victim* who always had bad things happen to her, but as a *survivor*, who’d had a bad thing happen to her once, but who didn’t need to let that define who she would always be. In fact, she said, the more she thought of herself as a survivor, the more she realized that she was not a polluted, poisoned person, but that she was a woman of strength and courage and integrity—someone whose painful past could give her strength to help others get through their pain, too. The whole reason she was telling us this story was because she had become an advocate for child protection, and her work now was consulting with places like churches in setting up policies and procedures to help prevent sexual abuse. She was someone whose own life had been lifted up to become a sign of hurt transformed to healing in the love of Christ.

And that transformation from hurt to healing can be lifted up in our lives, too. It’s there in our public life: I read an editorial this week venturing the opinion that maybe the public anger over bonuses to AIG executives paid out of government bailout funds might actually lead to some reform in executive pay, maybe even create some change of attitude in the financial industry, shifting attention from just making money to making money to serve the common good. That would be healing. That mystery is there in our church life: Yesterday I read an email from Kim Webster, the rector of St John’s Episcopal Church in Waynesboro, that was broken into and vandalized on Thursday night, in which Kim spoke about how parishioners and local churches and the bishop and the church insurance company had all rallied together to make repairs and to express their forgiveness of the unknown people who broke in—and how this painful experience was turning into something that was bringing the parish closer together. There is healing there. That mystery there in our personal lives: Not long ago I had a conversation with someone who told me how her grief over her mother’s death some years ago had motivated her to learn more about pastoral care and personal ministry and helping others walk through their grief experiences, too. There is healing there. Over and over again, in ways large and small, we are called to see in our lives and the lives of those around us that mystery of God’s love transforming hurt into healing, that mystery of God entering into the poisonous and painful moments of our lives and creating from them possibilities for wholeness and strength and joy, that mystery of God lifting us up from being dead in our trespasses to being made alive in Christ.

That is the weird thing going on in our scriptures today, that is the paradox given to us to be our Good News today. That is the mystery in which we are trained by all our Lenten disciplines. Let it be our prayer that we may lift up that paradox and live out that mystery and rejoice in that Good News all our days. Amen.