

4th Sunday in Lent - March 2015 – Jn. 3:14-21 by Rev. Matt Bruns

Over the last three weeks during Lent we've been challenged about making right choices, avoiding short cuts, and reassessing our priorities. So to stay with this unfolding theme of personal and corporate examination and preparation, it makes sense for me to speak this week about.... snakes. Let's face it most of us do NOT want to be in the company of snakes. Snakes are slippery, scaly, slimy and scary. Snakes are creatures we really do not want to engage or embrace.

"Anaconda" was a great title for a movie about the Amazon, but "Snakes on a Plane" was there ever a better B-movie title! Combining our fear of snakes with our loathing of economy class air travel — what a genius movie idea. Snakes are creatures so different from us that they evoke revulsion and fear, even when we do not know if the snake we are looking at is dangerous, or a harmless natural insect repellent.

Thinking about two of our readings today got me wondering about the way in which the symbol of the snake has been used in many cultures over many thousands of years. Tom Wright reflects on the snake's symbolism and mentions its history from the snake in the Garden of Eden; to the serpent of Ananta in some branches of Hinduism, to the mythic serpent-ancestor of the Aztecs and the 'old god of nature' in parts of Africa to this day; from poetry to art and medicine, not least psycho analysis. The figure of the serpent or snake has haunted human imagination since the dawn of time.

In many cultures, Wright goes onto explain, the serpent is seen as positive and powerful, though dangerous. In many others, not least in some parts of the Jewish and Christian traditions, the serpent is seen as a strong negative force, symbolising evil in the world and in all of us. We have been conditioned to this animosity, to this fear, since the words of Genesis.

The question of what to do about the serpent is a way of asking the question of what to do about evil – or what different cultures have designated as evil. Our gospel passage today gives a clear and confident answer. Verse 14 looks back at the incident described from our OT reading as the Israelites wander in the wilderness, grumble at Moses and end up being punished by poisonous snakes invading the camp. The people of Israel have become their own worst enemy by rebelling against God.

So God gave Moses a remedy - make a serpent out of bronze, put it on a pole and hold it up for people to look at. Anyone who looked at the serpent on the pole would live. This symbol of a serpent wrapped around a pole appears in other cultures too, and remains to this day as a sign of healing. It's used by various medical organisations – do medic alert bracelets ring any bells?

The bronze serpent was thereafter stored in the Tabernacle as a sacred object until much later King Hezekiah discovered that the people were worshipping it and broke it to pieces (2 Kings 18:4). In Jesus' time one writer found it necessary to emphasize that it wasn't the bronze serpent itself that had saved the Israelites, but the saving power of God. All this shows the strange power of symbol and highlights the importance of verse 14 for understanding what Jesus had come to do.

How can the crucifixion of Jesus be like putting the snake on a pole I hear you ask? Wasn't the snake the problem not the solution? Surely John isn't suggesting that Jesus was like the poisonous snakes that had been attacking the people?

Well, no he isn't. What he is saying is that the evil which was and is in the world – deeply rooted within us all – was somehow allowed to take out its full force on Jesus. The lifted up bronze serpent anticipates the lifted up Jesus on the cross. When we look at Jesus on the cross what we are looking at is the result of the evil in which we are all stuck.

We are seeing what God has done about it. We are seeing what God's own love looks like. The cross is at the heart of John's amazing new picture of who God is. He is now to be known as the God who is both Father and Son and the Son is revealed when he is lifted up and dies under the weight of the world's evil.

There is a story that comes out of the Bedouin culture. "Bedouin" is the Aramaic name for "desert dwellers." These people live much as the characters of the Old Testament did.

During a heated argument, according to this story, a young Bedouin struck and killed a friend of his. Knowing the ancient, inflexible customs of his people, the young man fled, running across the desert under the cover of darkness, seeking safety. He went to the black tent of the tribal chief in order to seek his protection. The old chief took the young Arab in. The chief assured him that he would be safe until the matter could be settled legally.

The next day, the young man's pursuers arrived, demanding the murderer be turned over to them. They would see that justice would prevail in their own way. "But I have given my word," protested the chief. "But you don't know whom he killed!" they countered. "I have given my word," the chief repeated. "He killed your son!" one of them blurted out. The chief was deeply and visibly shaken with his news. He stood speechless with his head bowed for a long time. The accused and the accusers as well as curious onlookers waited breathlessly.

What would happen to the young man? Finally the old man raised his head. "Then he shall become my son," he informed them, "and everything I have will one day be his." The young man certainly didn't deserve such generosity. And that, of course, is the point. Love in its purest form is beyond comprehension. No one can merit it. It is freely given. It is agape, the love of God. Look to the cross. At the cross we encounter love in its purest form (King Duncan, Collected Sermons).

Preacher David Lose writes that *"we are taught from a very early age to avoid true vulnerability – and the truly vulnerable – at all costs. The kind of self-sacrificing love Jesus offers is frightening to such a world. No wonder some run and hide, as it requires us to trust nothing other than God."* He goes on to say that only when we've died to all of our delusions of actually being in control do we realize that such loss of perceived freedom and power is actually life.

The real story in this week's gospel text is not about snakes anywhere at any time. This week's gospel text is not about a moment of human failure. The real story in this week's gospel is that God is God and we are not, and that God created us for relationship and will stop at nothing to show us how much God loves us. God's love, you see, is tenacious. God's love will continue to chase us after us, seeking to hold onto us and redeem us all the days of our lives, whether we like it or not.

We all live our own personal stories, our "small" stories of large hurt and loss. But as followers of Jesus we each live our story within the "meta-narrative," the greater story, of God's redefining loss and redeeming love for one each of us. All of us are living a story. The only question is what story and whose story are you living? Keeping up with the Joneses? Hollywood? High Street? Wall Street?

Jesus invites us to let him be the author of our own story, so that his story and our story can become one. And that one story, the greatest story ever (but too often never) told, 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.” Amen.