

St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Glen Ellyn, IL  
Sunday, March 12, 2017  
The Rev. Canon Paul-Gordon Chandler  
Lent 2

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### **The Biggest Snake Story** (John 3:1-17 - Lent 2)

One of my friends is someone named Robert Twigger. He is writer and novelist, though not just an ordinary writer. Twigger initiates and then goes on wild adventures and exotic explorations around the world, and then writes books about them. You can look him up on Amazon.com

And one of his books is titled *Big Snake*. Discovering that the award of \$50,000 offered way back by US President Teddy Roosevelt to anyone who captured live a 30-foot snake was yet unclaimed, he determined to find such a snake—taking him eventually to the jungles of Indonesia hunting for reticulated pythons—with National Geographic doing a documentary on his find.

He once told me one of his favorite snake stories, which is actually an ancient Middle Eastern Sufi dervish tale, and is very much what our Gospel reading is all about.

It is a story about a man in the middle of the desert who is dehydrated and dying of thirst. Knowing he is on the point of expiration, he cries out to God to save him, just before he falls into a stupor, a prelude to dying. Just at that moment there is a horrible hissing and a large snake appears. He jerks back, lunges somehow to his feet, and starts running. He runs and runs, looking back all the while, to be assured he is rid of the snake—and suddenly trips, and falls over—into a stream. After slaking his thirst, he begins to berate God. “I asked to be saved and you sent a snake to kill me!” he shouts. And God replies, “When you ask to be saved, you cannot also demand how you are saved—in your case only something you feared more than death would be the method of your salvation.”

When one grows up in Africa, as I did, one thing you are guaranteed of is having snake stories. And believe me I have a lot of snake stories! But I will leave them for another time and place.

For thousands of years, in many cultures, the symbol of the snake has been used—slithering their way down through the ages—from the snake in the Garden of Eden, to the Nile Cobra adorning the crown of the Pharaoh in Egypt, to being the deadly antagonists in Greek mythology such as the 9-headed Hydra who defeated Hercules, or the serpent Ananta in some branches of Hinduism and the cobra seen on the neck of Shiva, to the mythic serpent-ancestor of the Aztecs, to St. Patrick supposedly banishing all the snakes from Ireland, to the “old god of nature” in parts of Africa to this day;

...and in poetry (such as in D.H. Lawrence), to art and medicine, not least Freud's psychoanalysis; the figure of the serpent or snake has both haunted and healed human imagination from the beginning of time.

In our day, surveys show that snakes beat out speaking in public and spiders, as the things in life people fear most.

And our Gospel reading, albeit somewhat hidden in the text, has to do with snakes—both snake(s), plural, and a single large snake.

So, you could call this the “The Biggest Snake Story”.

Our Gospel reading is Jesus’ private conversation with Nicodemus, the Jewish religious leader that came to Jesus on a dark Palestinian night, seeking spiritual counsel. And there under the stars, Jesus told him that he “must be born anew, or again, or from above”. And Nicodemus asked him “how is this possible?” And as Jesus answers him, bringing to a close their profound conversation, he does so by 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”*.

Jesus is referring to himself of course, and his upcoming death on the cross, through a typological interpretation of that strange and now all too often unfamiliar story, which most Jews then knew very well, that is found in the book of Numbers in the Hebrew Bible.

It was when the Hebrews, during their Exodus from Egypt in the Sinai desert, complained against God—ceasing to trust God for their well-being. And poisonous snakes appeared and bit them--which they interpreted as having been sent by God as a punishment.

Pleading with Moses for God’s help, Moses follows God’s directions to set up a large serpent of bronze or copper on a pole (this took place in the Sinai near one of the great sources of copper in ancient times.)

And by looking up at the bronze serpent, those bitten were cured—they were healed.

This odd scene of suffering and healing is powerfully captured by Michelangelo in his painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, which you may remember –where snakes are entwined all around the people and yet the faces of those who are seen looking at the bronze snake are full of light, while those looking down or away are shown as to be shadowed in darkness.

Interestingly, the Hebrews preserved the statue of this bronze snake for many years, even after they entered the Promised Land and were an established nation. And it was only much later in Israel’s history, that the king (Hezekiah), ended up having it destroyed as the people were worshipping it as an idol.

From excavations at Timna in the desert in Sinai, where the Israelites were heading toward when all this happen, we have confirmation of the origins of the use of a snake symbol in that area.

In a Temple of the Egyptian God, Hathor, used in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, and then taken over by Midianites at a later date who made it into a tent shrine, a copper snake statue was found.

Whether Moses owed the idea of the copper snake to the Midianites, or their copper snakes, like the one discovered, where imitations of Moses' snake, we of course do not know.

The Hebrew word for "pole," which the bronze serpent was put on, was also the word for "sign/symbol," and it is this word-play that Jesus uses in our Gospel reading to refer to his upcoming death on the cross.

But in our Gospel reading, Jesus takes this old story and uses it as a kind of parable to describe not only what will happen to him, but also to emphasize the very essence of what is often called "the Gospel", which simply means the "good news".

In these words, Jesus is in effect saying that what we call the "Gospel" is really all about healing.

By referring to this somewhat odd Hebrew story, Jesus is emphasizing the parallel between the bronze serpent in the desert as a remedy for physical illness and the cross as a remedy for a deeper, spiritual, illness.

Furthermore, in our Gospel reading is also found the most popular Biblical verse in the whole world, the all-too-famous John 3:16, that one may see paraded at sporting events, on bumper stickers, or the signs of street preachers: "*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.*"

Martin Luther, the great 16<sup>th</sup> century German reformer, called this verse "the Gospel in miniature".

And when you think about it, John 3:16 is filled with the language of healing — should "not *perish*" but have "eternal *life*"—in other words, being healed to complete wholeness.

To "perish" in this context means far more than physical illness leading to death—but rather a tragic missing of what God designed life to be.

The concept here is that humanity has been smitten with a deadly disease.... and that God is all about restoring.

And therefore this "eternal life" that is mentioned here is not related necessarily to the future—as the afterlife was not so much of a concern for Jews at the time. But rather it infers a sharing of God's "divine" life now —entering into and participating in the very life God intended for all in the present.

Echoing Jesus' other words, "I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly."

Our faith, often called the Gospel, is essentially about God restoring the world and God's creation, to health.

When you read through the Scriptures the dominant theme is that God is all about bringing us complete healing---wholeness —it is the Hebrew word “shalom”—which means spiritual, physical, emotional, psychological wholeness—“wellness” in the fullest sense of the word.

This is very much what Jesus was all about; in demonstrating the character of God, Jesus perhaps more than any other action was about healing.

In my own spiritual journey, I have increasingly realized that a life with God relates to every part of me—spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, and physically.

I am reminded of the words of Eugene O’Neill, the American Nobel Prize playwright (who was ill, both physically and emotionally, much of his life); “Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue.”

I recall the restoration work that was being done to the frescoes at St. Anthony’s Monastery in Egypt, the oldest monastery in the world. Before their restoration, the frescoes on the dark walls seemed dull, with 1700 years of candle soot, and lack of maintenance. However, after their restoration it was breathtaking to see what was underneath—to see them as they were originally painted to be—it was astounding! They came alive—sporting vibrant colors that for years had been muted by dust and pollution and graffiti.

God is ultimately like those fresco-restorers--desiring to restore all and everything to wholeness—to the way God originally intended for us.

To give new life; not to heal and give life only to the body, but to heal whatever is broken, to give life to whatever is half-alive--is not well or dying.

Of course, we all know terrible things happen in this world—great suffering exists that is not cured or healed—for whatever reason we may never know. However, we can be assured that there exists deep within the fabric of God’s creation, God’s power to heal and to breathe new life into us and everyone else—which is probably something all of us--in the depths of our own sufferings (whatever they have been, are or will be)—have or will mysteriously experience in some way.

And Jesus’ encouragement to Nicodemus is to continue to open himself up all the more to receive this wholeness and life from God.

Interestingly, the paradox in this “divine healing story” that Jesus reminds Nicodemus of, is that the very thing that made the ancient Hebrews sick in the Sinai, is the thing that also healed them.

The remedy used by God there among the Hebrews was looking at a venom-less snake in order to heal their venomous snakebites —which seems on the surface totally inappropriate. The antidote God used for the snakebites was another snake.

Certainly, among the Hebrews’ neighbors the serpent seems at that time to have been a symbol of life and fertility. Which is why in ancient Egypt model serpents were often worn to ward off serpent-bites.

Here however, the serpent is a cure for those bitten and dying and not just a protection.

Here those dying, due the bite of living snakes, were restored to life by a dead reddish-colored snake. In other words, a thing of poison and death is transformed into a thing of God's gracious will to heal and restore.

Hence, the serpent entwined around a pole, a staff, is a symbol which has long appeared in many cultures as a sign of healing, having great ancient mythological significance, most clearly seen with Asclepius, the ancient Greek god for healing and medicine. His symbol was a snake entwined around his staff—connoting the idea that the very thing that causes illness is used to be the source of healing.

This sign of a snake entwined around a staff/pole is now used today as a symbol of numerous medical organizations (such as the WHO), hospitals, pharmaceutical and drug companies—and often you will see it on the sign of pharmacies.

The serpent not only embodies and reflects human belief about our deepest unwellness, but also about our ultimate cure.

The source of suffering also becomes the source of salvation/healing. It is a curious thing that “like often cures like” -- wounds can heal wounds.

And the same could of course be said about how Jesus' life and death is used to bring us “new, abundant and eternal life”—again, a seemingly totally inappropriate thing.

For a creation that is suffering and is not as God intended it to be, our faith provides a cure that begins by looking to the suffering of someone on a cross. -Mystically, that instrument of terrible suffering and death, becomes a source of healing—bringing life in its deepest dimension.

When you think about it, it is quite an unusual thing that today crosses--symbolizing terrible suffering--are worn as jewelry around our necks.

But this is the paradoxical beauty of our faith. God often uses the very thing that brings the greatest pain, suffering, hardship or illness, as a means to bring about a healing and restoration in our lives in far deeper ways

Kathleen Norris, the contemporary best-selling author of *Dakota* and *Cloister Walk* put it this way in speaking about her faith: “...the very things that had gotten me into such irredeemable messes were the instruments of my conversion.”

And of course, the main motivation behind God's never-ending mission of healing us, and the whole world, is found in the word “love”. “God so loved us...that God gave...” Jesus tells Nicodemus. God loved him as an individual and not as some faceless religious recruit.

And this knowledge of God's love transformed Nicodemus. He finds himself irresistibly drawn to Jesus from then on...from defending him in the religious court to later bringing the embalming spices and helping in Jesus burial.

Kahlil Gibran, the early 20<sup>th</sup> Lebanese writer, poet and mystic, in his marvelous book, *Jesus Son of Man*, has Nicodemus describe the impact of Jesus' presence in his life: "[Jesus] was opening our eyes to the dawn of a new day.... Do you not remember me, Nicodemus, who believed in naught but the [religious] laws and decrees, and was in continual subjection to observances? And behold me now, a man who walks with life and laughs with the sun from the first moment it smiles upon the mountain until it yields itself to bed behind the hills. I care not for what shall befall me tomorrow, for I know that Jesus quickened my sleep and made my distant dreams my companions and my road-fellows...[W]hen the Poet of Galilee spoke to me...I was ...lifted to the heights."

Our faith is all about God taking the initiative to heal us due to God's overwhelming love for each of us.

During the time of Christ, the Jewish people, like Nicodemus, looked on God as one who imposed laws upon them, and who

was about punishing them (hence they viewed the snakes in the desert in this ancient story as God's punishment).

However, here Jesus presents a completely different view of God—not as a taskmaster waiting to pounce, but as a loving and gentle parent who longs for nothing more than their children to be made completely whole.

We learn here that God's immediate relationship with us is one of unfathomable affection!

I close with those lines that I love very much . . . written by the 7<sup>th</sup> century monk, Maximos the Confessor; "God is like a good and loving physician who heals with individual treatment each of those who are trying to make progress."

For Nicodemus, this was truly a revolutionary concept.

And like an overflowing artesian well, experiencing the love of God deep within us, is the most powerful, transformational and healing thing imaginable.

Amen.