

Nehushtan

The Old Testament lesson this morning, of God telling Moses to make a serpent out of bronze and put it on a stick is interesting. When the people were bitten by the poisonous snakes, and looked at the bronze serpent, which Moses presumably placed at the center of the camp, they were spared from death. One thing to note is that many of the surrounding cultures in that era worshiped idols in the shape of snakes as representations of their gods.

For instance, the cobra had been associated with the Pharaoh in Egypt. If you've seen any pictures or movies of ancient Egypt, you know that Pharaoh always has a cobra sticking out from the front of his crown. The Egyptians believed that the cobra protected the Pharaoh, and would spit venom at his enemies. Other cultures in that desert area had similar views on snakes. Their view on snakes in those days was very different than ours today. Nowadays, people either like them, or they hate them. I don't mind them – around here, they're not poisonous, and they eat mice and moles – but I like to give them their space.

But going back to the ancient people – and the idea of having some cultures worshipping snakes – people aren't very smart. Most people are not critical thinkers. So, God tells Moses to put up the bronze snake, which cures the people if they look at it when their bitten, so that they won't die. Who do you suppose the people gave credit to, for not dying, after being bitten by the snakes? We would hope they'd give credit to God – who told Moses what to do, right? Well...

Besides the idolatry we so often talk about with which the ancient Israelites wrestled, this bronze snake became a problem for them, too. By the time of the reign of Solomon's descendant, Hezekiah, the bronze snake itself had become an idol. I suspect it became an idol for some almost immediately after Moses put the thing in the center of the camp. According to the writer of 2 Kings (18:4), "Hezekiah removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan)." According to the *Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*, "it most likely stood in the temple court in Jerusalem for the people assembled there. It appears to have been an apotropaic object [basically a good luck charm], protecting those bitten by serpents."¹ With all this in mind, let's turn to our Gospel lesson, found in John 3:14-21. **Read John 3:14-21.**

¹ Nehushtan, *The Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*, Mark Powell, Gen. Ed. (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2011). page 696.

Nicodemus Comes to Talk

Our Gospel lesson this morning opens in the middle of a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. He was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin's role in that culture was similar to the role of our Congress and Supreme Court. If we could roll Congress and the Supreme Court into a single body of roughly 70 to 100 guys which made laws – and interpreted them – we would have something very much like the Sanhedrin in Jesus' day.

It's a powerful council. And since Nicodemus is on it, he's a powerful man. Prior to what we've read, Nicodemus has come by night to question Jesus. He tells Jesus, "Rabbi, we know You are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs You are doing if God were not with him," (John 3:2). And then they get into a conversation about being born again – which Nicodemus doesn't understand.

If you have Jesus' words in red letters in your Bible, you see that the entire Gospel lesson today is in red. He's telling this stuff to Nicodemus. He says, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him," (John 3:14-15). Jesus mentions that old bronze snake that we talked about earlier. What a wild thing to say!

He compares Himself to the poisonous snake that Moses hung on the stick for the ancient Israelites to look at. See, we have to think back to that story in Numbers to get the connection. The people were facing punishment – death by snake bite. And when they repented, and asked Moses to intercede for them, God turned the means of judgment into the means of their salvation and restoration to life. The means of judgment becomes the means to life. Jesus on the cross – if we believe it – takes our judgment, and restores us to life.

Jesus Redeems the Whole Creation

That's the Gospel in one sentence. Jesus takes our punishment, we repent and turn to Him, and He saves us. He tells us, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him," (verses 16-17). So often we hear this verse, especially verse 16, and we think of people, right? God so loves people that He gave... Except it's not just people.

The Greek word is *kosmos* – which is where we get our word, "cosmos." It's the entire universe – the whole Creation. Paul writes in his letter to the Church at Rome: "The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from

its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time, "(Rom. 8:19-22).

See friends, the entire universe needs saved and redeemed by Jesus Christ. The kicker here, is if we believe – God hasn't sent the Son to condemn, but for life – He transforms the moment of judgment into a moment of salvation for us. If we believe it – its effects have the power to give eternal life. But believing is not automatic – or easy – it seems. Jesus says, "Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son," (John 3:18). If we believe, He takes all our sin, mistakes, bad decisions – you name it – He takes that all on Himself at the cross, and He gives us all His goodness, His holiness, and righteousness.

Jesus Gives Us Life

Jesus – quite literally – gives us life. Come back this afternoon at 4:00, because I'm going to talk a little bit more about how we're actually with Him in this moment – where He is right now. It sounds weird, I know – and I'll explain it later today. Jesus describes the judgment that God makes about the state of people in the world next. He says, "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed," (verses 19-20).

When given the Light, we withdraw from it because we've come to love our existence without it and don't want to have to change the way we live. We see this very often today – and it's one of the main excuses atheists give for not believing – church people putting on Sunday faces, but living worldly lives the other six days of the week. I used to live like that. Put on my Sunday face, and live a worldly life the rest of the time. It just doesn't work.

Jesus tells Nicodemus, and us, "Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God," (verse 21). He knows what you've done. He knows what I've done. And He tells us He loves us anyhow. To put it bluntly, though, to truly follow Him, we have to reject the evil that we perpetuate.

We Have to Love the Light

If we aren't willing to part with those things which keep us from God, then we aren't willing to let them be brought into the light to be dealt with. We have to love the Light – and Jesus is the Light. That's what Jesus is getting at. If we believe that Jesus Christ is the God who brings light into the world, if we trust that He has the ability – and has already done what is necessary – to make us at peace and at home with God

again, then we will not be afraid to let things in this world change. Time and time again throughout the Old and New Testaments, we see God say “Do not fear,” to His people.

When we trust Jesus with our very lives, when we believe in Him, we have absolutely nothing to fear. He knows us better than we know ourselves. We don't have to be afraid to bring our whole selves – the good, the bad, the ugly, the beautiful, stressed or at ease – into the glow of His light for further reflection and transformation. Just like Moses lifted the bronze serpent on the pole, and the people looked to it to receive healing from God, today we “lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim till all the world adore His sacred name.”² He has loved you since before the world began – and He wants you to know that no matter what you've done, or will ever do, if you give yourself to Him, He won't reject you.

Prayer: Steadfast God, You reach out to us in mercy even when we rebel against Your holy call and prefer to walk in disobedience rather than in the way of Your divine truth. Soften our hearts with the warmth of Your love, that we may know Your Son alive within us, redeeming us and raising us up into Your eternal presence. Amen.

² “Lift High the Cross,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing, 1989), page 159.