

Lent 4B, March 14, 2021, St. Anne's  
Numbers 21:4–9; Psalm 107:1–3, 17–22; Ephesians 2:1–10; John 3:14–21

When I looked at this morning's OT reading it reminded me of Indiana Jones in that scene where he looks over the edge of the pit and moans, "snakes, why does it have to be snakes!" But, of course this isn't Indiana Jones' snakes! This is a story of the Exodus. For almost forty years the Children of Israel have been in the wilderness entirely supported by God, who provides them not only with food and water, but also sustains and protects them. And *yet*, despite *everything* God has done for them they clearly *still* haven't learned **gratitude** – because *once again* they're complaining. But still, I have to say, the punishment does seem harsh and punitive – it's out of proportion to 'the crime'. After all, the people were just grumbling about the food: manna yesterday, manna today, manna tomorrow. We can understand their weariness with the menu; in all truth, after 40 years of manna we too would probably be grumpy. Indeed, after just *one* year of living with pandemic restrictions many of us are grumbling endlessly about it!

**But**, we should note a couple of things. First, this is a story told from **Israel's** point of view - it *does not* give us an authoritative picture of God. Indeed, the idea that the snakes actually *are* punishment for their grumbling comes from the people themselves – neither God **nor** the narrator actually says that. But, even so, maybe we **are** being reminded here that God's patience **does** have some bounds, and that God doesn't have *endless* patience with us when we are unremittingly negative and 'bitchy' in the face of *all* the blessings we *do* have.

Of course, the most *famous* biblical reference to a serpent is the story of Adam and Eve, and Jews *do* sometimes interpret today's passage through reference to the serpent of Eden. But, of course, Jews **don't** interpret the story of Adam and

Eve as being about ‘original sin’, or see it as ‘The Fall’, since that interpretation only dates from St. Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century – so they understand the *role* of the serpent quite differently. While both faiths identify the serpent as *Satan*, **Jews** have never understood Satan to be outside of God's command, or a rebel against divine authority. In *Jewish* understanding, Satan is a sort of cosmic prosecuting attorney, entrusted *by God* with the job of testing us. While he might strike us as performing these duties with excessive zeal, Jews understand this as a necessary function to maintain order in the world, **not** as rebellion against God.

The ancient rabbis equated both the primordial serpent and Satan himself with a force known as the "*yetzer ha-ra*". Sadly, there's no English equivalent to this term, but it's a drive combining the features of ambition, greed and sexual desire. According to *Jewish* understanding, God implanted this "*yetzer ha-ra*" this passionate drive, into every human being and it's **essential** for the proper functioning of humanity. **But**, and this is a big but, our ‘yetzer ha-ra’ can *become* ‘evil’ when it's allowed to trespass beyond its legitimate boundary. Hence the need for the Satan to challenge where our boundaries are. Sexuality, for instance is a wonderful gift in the context of a loving relationship, **but** it can be *perverted* into a force for hatred and abuse. Rape is an extreme example of its perversion. 'Ambition' can be either good or bad. It can be good when it's channelled towards creativity and the service of humanity, but a fiery scourge when it's twisted into *unrestricted* covetousness and greed for **our self**. The point of all this is that our role as humans is **not** to eliminate the metaphorical "serpent," our *yetzer ha-ra*, from our lives but to learn to *direct it* into a *productive* course. **Jews** try to do this by following the values and way of life set down in the Torah, the Law. As *Christians* we try to do it through living in the way Jesus taught.

So, what does all this have to do with our bronze serpent on a pole? The Mishnah, that great compendium of Jewish oral traditions, explicitly rejects any simplistic *magical* interpretation of the story. Instead, it says, “as Israel lifted their eyes and gazed upward, they would submit their hearts to their Father in Heaven - and **this** would bring about their cure.”

What is being suggested here is that lifting their eyes towards heaven and meditating on the image of the serpent - the metaphorical image of the Satan whose job it is to help keep us within the boundaries of God’s way - was intended to teach them something about their role as a holy people. Living in relationship with God does **not** require that we relinquish the normal, healthy human drives that God has given us. God **wants** us to live full and joyful lives and our *yetzer ha-ra* (our ambition and desire and sexuality) is an *essential* component of our humanity. **But**, only when held within the *appropriate boundaries*. The image of the serpent reminds us of a basic truth - holiness is achieved by **perfecting** our humanity, by learning to *desire* what is right and proper - **not** by denying our humanity or seeking to rise above it by pretending that we **have no** *yetzer ha-ra*. In other words, we are being reminded to harness and *direct* our passions and drive into the ways of *God*- for the good of everyone, rather than as a way to raise *ourselves* up at others expense.

One of the tragic results of Augustine’s concept of ‘original sin’ being accepted as ‘The interpretation’ of the story of Adam and Eve for so many centuries, is that it has warped our sense of ‘human nature’ as basically good – which is what the story of creation tells us. It has resulted in a Christianity that for some centuries has asserted that there is something in our very humanity that puts us at odds with God's plans. And so, in order to live in harmony with nature and with the world,

we need to overturn or suppress our human nature. Today's image of the bronze serpent serves us as a reminder that those basic drives to improve our lot and to provide material comfort for our families and so forth are **not** in and of themselves evil. However, they **do** have a terrifying potential to be **turned** to evil ends when they exceed their legitimate boundaries - when they're emptied of compassion, justice and social or environmental responsibility. They have potential for evil when we forget **gratitude** and **whose** world this is, and start to live as if only **we** matter – which is what the Children of Israel are doing in this story. Their constant **bitching** that things aren't the way **they want** is a slap in the face of the gracious and generous God who is giving them *life*. For all of us, the choice between life and death is *rarely* a choice between blatant opposites, but between what *masquerades* as good and what truly *is* good for us *and* for our world.

The cure the Children of Israel were offered for the venomous snake bites was to stare at the image of the very thing they **feared**. This image of the serpent held up before them forced them to *face* their fears. They looked at, and into, the image of **death** and when they looked back again, they were better able to recognize the gracious work of God in their life. In the same way, the Gospel of John says, the Son of Man is *lifted up* so that *we* can *see* the passionate love of God. By looking *towards* the image of the crucified Christ, the believer looks *beyond* it to the God who redeems us and helps us live within the boundaries of what **is** life-giving. The symbols of the bronze serpent and the cross are signs of divine involvement in our journey toward understanding and wholeness. They are symbols that push us to see beyond what is immediately obvious, beyond what we *fear*, to see the God who seeks life, even in the midst of death.