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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Fourth Sunday in Lent  
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Lectionary Year B: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

The fear of snakes is known as ophidiophobia...and, yes, I had to look that up. I'm not sure I have this phobia or not, but let's just say that if I rolled over in my bed one night and found a snake there with me, I might panic a bit. In other situations -- say, where one might expect to find snakes -- maybe not.

Many years ago, when I was serving my first parish in southern Minnesota, my Dad came for a visit, and, in my guest room, I had a roll-away bed for him to sleep on. When my Dad turned back the bedspread, he called me into the room to show me the garter snake that had been resting underneath the bedspread. In response to his discovery, I asked, "What do you want to do about this?"

How the snake got there remains a mystery to me, seeing that it had to have made its way from the ground (or below) up to a second-story bedroom, but its choice of resting place made perfect sense. Snakes are cold-blooded and that old bedspread would've been a nice, warm place to snuggle under. I'm sure that snake was disappointed to discover that he couldn't remain there indefinitely.

I'm guessing that, if I were to survey everyone gathered here this morning, I would find the expected variety of feelings about snakes -- ranging from full-blown ophidiophobia to a sort of neutral "meh" attitude and even to an affinity for them. The latter

of these would, of course, be known as ophidiophilia; in fact, when I was in seminary, one of my classmates kept a snake as a pet...on campus! That really wasn't my sort of thing, but it didn't bother me, either -- although I'd imagine that it made his more ophidiophobic neighbors quite uncomfortable.

The Bible -- the book of Genesis, in particular -- has an ophidiophobic bias, looking at the serpent's role in the temptation to eat the forbidden fruit. The "serpent" in Genesis is actually the more common snake, if one were to use a more literal translation; he is described, too, as "crafty," and, prior to being cursed, he was able to speak. There were beliefs in the ancient Near East that the snake was immortal, noting especially that the snake could shed its skin and still live. Today, our negative feelings about snakes reflect generations upon generations of conditioning from, in particular, poisonous snakes; simply put, we're wired to stay away from things that could kill us, which isn't necessarily a bad thing.

References to a serpent appear in both our First Reading and our Gospel this morning; in Numbers, chapter 21, Moses lifts up a serpent on a pole so that the Israelites could gaze upon it and not be killed by the poisonous snakes that bit them. Without that background, the opening verses of our Gospel text don't make much sense. But Jesus recalls Numbers 21 exactly when he says, "And 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" (John 3:14-15).

Before going any further with this, I must say that, fear of snakes notwithstanding, the stories and images here are rather challenging to the modern mind. Sure, the Israelites aren't very happy about how their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land is going; the text even notes that they "detest this miserable food" (Numbers 21:5c). But what confounds the modern mind -- theologically, at least -- is the way God interacts with the Israelites in their situation. In response to their whining (for lack of a better word), the text says that God "sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died" (Numbers 21:6). This really challenges all the imagery of a gracious and just God I've attempted to convey all these years, doesn't it?

The people complained, so God sends them poisonous snakes...not a very gracious or just thing to do, if you ask me.

But the relationship between God and the Israelites in the Old Testament is much more interactive and conversational than we're accustomed to. The classic example of this is found in the book of Jonah, where the people of Nineveh "turned from their evil ways," and so, quoting directly from Jonah, "God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it" (Jonah 3:10b).

God changed his mind! How can people believe in an absolute, unchanging, and pre-ordaining God when they hear something like that?

In Numbers, chapter 21, as in Jonah, God relents when Moses tells God about the Israelites' misery and how they are sorry for "speaking against the Lord." God's remedy to the situation seems a bit bizarre by today's standards, too; he tells Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live" (Numbers 21:8). Of course, one could also see this as very prescient of modern treatments for snakebite; you need the venom of the poisonous snake to make the anti-venom for the cure. Sure enough, our text from Numbers notes that "whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live" (21:9b).

But for as strange as this all might sound, there is evidence of God's grace as God offers a solution to the Israelites' snake-ridden misery. God doesn't eradicate the snakes completely, which would've, of course, made for a more satisfying conclusion to the story, but God does provide a way for the Israelites to endure through the pestilence in which they find themselves. It's not a cure, but it's at least a treatment.

Bringing this into our present reality, how often do we turn to God and ask for the miraculous "fix" when that might not be something God can give us? And looking back to the Israelites of old, how would we feel if, instead of getting rid of the snakes, God told us to look at this ridiculous bronze thing on a pole? (Maybe if it worked, we wouldn't think it was so ridiculous...) But the point is, I think, that God doesn't always give us the solutions or answers we're looking for; instead, God often surprises us with

ways to cope and endure, which, in itself, is a sure sign that he is listening to us.

The Gospel of John makes an intriguing tie between the serpent on the pole in Numbers, chapter 21 and the cross upon which Christ was lifted up. If we believe these to be Jesus' own words, it would surely indicate Jesus' fluency in the Five Books of Moses, and, I might add, this is a connection that seems unlikely for many to make...even among the most "fluent." Here, of course, the cross takes the place of Moses' pole as the life-giver. But there's a significant difference between the two. The serpent on the pole was a temporary solution to a passing problem. The cross, in contrast, is a permanent solution to an eternal problem. You see, snakes aren't the real problem, sin is, and sin affects the entire human race...not just twelve tribes of people descended from Abraham. So, knowing this, we can truly appreciate the Bible's best-known verse, which appears in our Gospel text today: "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" (John 3:16).

The death to which sin condemns us is eradicated in the cross of Christ, and belief in the cross's efficacy opens the doors to eternal life for all. "God so loved the world," so the text says. Thus, when Christ is lifted up on the cross, people for sure live, just as the case was with Moses and his pole, but this life has an infinitely greater ripple effect. Now, everyone who sees the cross lifted up and believes shall live.

For us, this means that we have life in the Crucified and Risen Christ both now and for all eternity. And I'd like to stress the "now" part of that, especially. While it is "meet and right" to anticipate the heavenly feast we will celebrate with our Lord in the kingdom of heaven, we cannot overlook our Lord's eternal presence with us now -- in his Word and at his holy Table. From Word and Table, Christ calls us to lift up the cross so that others might see it and live. It is our calling to make Christ's love known in giving, loving, and sharing, whether through the ministries of this parish or the charities of our community. And, beyond that, the witness that we offer in our public life, non-religious as it may be sometimes, is something that can give folks an indication of what kind of Christian we are. Indeed, we are lifting up the cross even when it's invisible!

Lastly, if you don't like snakes, remember that your phobia may just be due to the way you've been wired through generations upon generations of conditioning. In fact, you're supposed to be afraid of things that could kill you -- that's what protects us from premature death! But sometimes, great ironies arise, in which the poisonous venom of the snake is used in the anti-venom that treats snakebite...or when the instrument of death for one man gives life to all mankind. And yes, that apparent irony belongs to the cross, in which we find forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation. This isn't a temporary solution to a passing problem, but rather a revolutionary and permanent solution to an eternal problem. Yes, the cross lifted up has that much more power to

heal than the serpent that Moses lifted up. Let the cross ever be so among us that we enjoy eternal life with our Lord now and always.

Amen.