

Snakes on a Pole

March 22, 2009

(Lent 4 - Year B)

Numbers 21: 4-9

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Many years ago, when our boys were very little, I drove home from work one day and pulled into the driveway to see a very strange sight.

As I pulled into the driveway, both boys were out front, playing basketball and riding bikes.

And Susan was sitting in a lawn chair just outside the front door. She had a stack of magazines beside her and a glass of wine.

I rolled down the car window and asked Susan:
Why are you camped out here by the front door?

Susan was as white as a sheet as she said:

“I just saw a mouse in our house.

The mouse went running through our bedroom and I don't know where he is right now.

But I do know this:

I am not going back in that house until you catch that mouse.”

Being the sensitive husband that I am, I burst out laughing.

But Susan started to cry, and in the midst of her tears and fear, she said:

“I am serious, Jeff Fisher.

You are going to have to get me a hotel room, because I am not sleeping in our bedroom after I have seen a mouse in there.”

I calmed her down a bit and we all went out that night for dinner.

I then went to Wal-Mart to buy some mouse traps, which I set in various parts of the house.

After extensive persuasion, I talked Susan into staying in the house that night, but she insisted that we sleep in the guest room.

The next morning, I woke up early and checked all the traps.

And sure enough, our furry little mouse had been caught in the trap I had

set next to the pantry door.

I then woke Susan up with my hand behind my back.

I said to her:

“Susan, we caught our little mouse friend, last night.”

Bleary-eyed, she replied:

“We caught him?”

And, once again being the sensitive husband that I am, I said:

“Yes, we caught him - and here he is!”

Of course, I was kidding because my hand was really empty.

But Susan freaked out, nonetheless.

She did *not* want to look at the mouse that had invaded her house and had terrified her.

For it is human nature to not want to look at the things that scare us the most.

It is human nature to not want to look at our fears.

A few years ago, a movie was released entitled “Snakes on a Plane.”

This movie was about crate full of snakes, poisonous snakes, which were released onto an airplane while the plane was in the sky.

Our scripture reading today from the Old Testament is not called “Snakes on a Plane.”

But the scripture lesson could be titled “Snakes in the Wilderness.”

In this scripture reading from the book of Numbers, the Israelites have been wandering through the wilderness, after they escaped from Egypt through the Red Sea.

God provides the Israelites with food every day, raining down manna, the bread of heaven.

Yet the Israelites complain and whine about eating manna, the bread of heaven, every single day.

In response to their whining, God opens a crate of poisonous snakes among the people.

The snakes begin to bite the people and many of them die.

So the Israelites complain to their leader, Moses, about these snakes in the wilderness.

The Israelites apologize to God and to Moses for complaining so much. Then, the Israelites sit in a lawn chair by the front door with a glass of wine and stack of magazines, pleading for Moses to get rid of these snakes.

However, rather than setting up traps to get rid of the snakes, God has a very different answer.

God tells Moses to make a poisonous snake and to set it on top of a pole. Whenever the Israelites are bitten by a snake, they are to look at the snake on top of the pole, they are to look at the object of their fear. And when they look at the snake on the pole, they will live.

So Moses makes a serpent out of bronze and lifts it up on a pole. And whenever the Israelites look at the snake - lifted up on the pole - they are healed and live.

I know that many people are afraid of mice and spiders and snakes. And lately, even among the people of St. Alban's, I know that many of *us* have run out onto the front porch and are sitting fearfully in our lawn chair, afraid to go back into the house until the snakes and the mice in our lives have been destroyed.

Some people are afraid because of troubling health news, including the diagnosis of cancer or of heart or lung disease.
Some people are afraid because they are watching their retirement income and investments disappear in this economic downturn.
Some people are afraid because they are unemployed or underemployed.

Yet instead of setting traps to get rid of our fears, God takes the thing that we fear the most - and lifts it high upon a pole.

God takes our cancer,
Our 401(k) statement,
Our job,
And puts it up on a pole.

And when we look squarely at our fears, lifted up,
Then we will be healed and live.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus remembers the Old Testament story of
snakes in the wilderness as Jesus says:

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
So must the Son of Man be lifted up...

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.”

When the snakes were biting the Israelites in the wilderness, Moses
lifted up a snake on a pole.

And when our fears bite us, God lifts up Jesus on the Cross.

And when we look at Jesus, lifted up high on that pole, then we are
given abundant life, a life without fear, for ever.

At a very basic level, what we fear the most is death.

We fear the death of our bodies.

We fear the death of our marriages.

We fear the death of our children and our relationships with loved ones.

We fear the death of our financial security.

Yet instead of setting traps to get rid of our fears,

God takes what we fear the most - death - and sets it high upon a pole.

And so Jesus is lifted up, high upon a cross.

And when we look up, we see death, our greatest fear, in the death of the
Son of God.

And seeing that death, we know that nothing, not even death, can ever
stop us from being loved.

I know that, for myself, whenever I think about Jesus on his Cross, my
problems and complaints and fears grow strangely dim.

Whenever I think of Jesus on his Cross, with his arms outstretched in
love for me,

Then I feel loved - and alive.

God does not get rid of snakes on planes or the mouse in our house.
But God takes our fears - and lifts them on top of a pole.

For God so loved the world,
God so loves you,
That he lifts up his only Son.
So that when the snake bites you,
You will live, forever.

AMEN.

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