



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MARCH 18, 2012
THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Driven Into the Wilderness: For Life
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

Yesterday, if we wanted to be, we were all Irish. St. Patrick's Day, at least in our part of the world, has become an opportunity to celebrate all things Irish—and many that are not! It is a day for wearing and often eating and drinking things that are green. When we lived in Savannah, which holds the second largest St. Patrick's Day celebration in the country, the city was turned green for a week or more.

St. Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland. He lived in the fifth century A.D. and was actually kidnapped and forced into slavery in Ireland as a boy. After his escape and return home, he had a vision in which he heard cries begging him to return to Ireland to evangelize the island nation. Legends abound about this man while history is somewhat thin on facts about him. The most famous legend is that St. Patrick drove all the snakes out of Ireland although research has shown that Ireland likely has never had snakes. As far as I am concerned, fact or fiction, ridding any place of snakes is a good day's work! I like only two kinds of snakes: 1) those that are going in the opposite direction, and 2) those that are dead! I can tolerate snakes that are in museums behind glass walls, but for the most part I do not want to be anywhere near a snake!

I will admit that many snakes are beautiful creatures and quite helpful in keeping an area rodent-free; nevertheless, I agree with the Old Testament characterization of snakes being the embodiment of evil and the cause of suffering. The story of the temptation in the Garden is a good example as is the story of the rebellious Hebrew people that was read earlier from the book of Numbers.

At this point in Israel's story, the Hebrews had been in the desert for about forty years or what amounts to an entire generation. Moses put them on the move again, taking a long route south around Edom following the Red Sea. Once again, the Hebrew people started to complain. They fussed about the food and whined about the water. They grumbled and protested until God's patience, which was already stretched thin, completely wore out. We are told that God sent poisonous serpents among the Hebrews many of whom

died as a result. The people sent their leaders to Moses to beg for him to intercede with God. Moses did so and God instructed him to create a bronze serpent and place it on a pole so that anyone who was bitten could look upon it and be healed.

The story is not without its theological problems. How can we reconcile a story that tells us God sent a source of death among his people with the overarching biblical proclamation that God gives us life? It may be that this story, at least in part, explains why that generation of Hebrews was dying out before they reach the Promised Land. The entire narrative from Genesis forward tells us plainly that the people who left Egypt were not worthy to enter into Canaan. They did not trust God to provide for them day by day even though they had experienced God's protective care time and time again.

The important point of this story, I think, is that while God may not have removed the threat of the snakes, God did provide an antidote for anyone who was bitten. In a larger context, it reminds us that while God does not eliminate the causes of suffering and death in our world, God does provide a means by which they are overcome. For the Hebrew people in the desert, the bronze serpent on a pole brought healing and life. What appears to be a symbol of suffering and death is transformed into a source of healing and life. To this day, the serpent on a pole is often used as a symbol, not of evil, but of healing. The Rod of Asclepius, the symbol of Nehushtan, and the Caduceus are each used by various medical groups to indicate their commitment to the healing arts.

Fast forward twelve hundred or so years from the Hebrew people wandering in the desert besieged by poisonous serpents to the Hebrew people still wandering in a political/social/philosophical/ and spiritual desert with no sense of the Promised Land in sight. The Jews of Jesus' day were just as confused as to when God would deliver them from the Romans and send the Messiah as were the Hebrews a millennium or more earlier when they were waiting to dip their toes in the Jordan River and cross over into the land of abundance.

The story of Nicodemus is a good companion to the story of the serpents. Nicodemus represents his fellow Jews. In fact, he represents any of us who are uncertain about life and death, meaning and purpose, sin and salvation, eternal life and eternal condemnation. Nicodemus was a pharisee, a learned man who was well-educated in religious matters. He had studied

scripture, had learned at the feet of the best scholars of the time, and had obviously heard Jesus teach on several occasions.

But Nicodemus was also uncertain. He saw the oppression of his people. He could not ignore the plight of the poor and those who were afflicted in a variety of ways. He could not deny that life was not all that great despite living in the city that represented the very presence of God.

It was a difficult time for the Hebrew people. They were in the midst of what God had identified as The Promised Land, but the promise did not seem to be realized. There seemed to be no end to their suffering. The Roman government was oppressive. Their religious leadership was not much better. Imagine what it would be like to live daily with a blessing/curse spirituality. You are taught and believe that God will bless you if you do good deeds and behave yourself, but that God will curse and punish you if you do evil. Imagine what it would be like if every event that occurred was interpreted in light of your actions and faith. Life would be burdensome and heavy. Each day would be onerous. Every bright spot would be seen as a sign of God's favor but every failure and hardship would be interpreted as an indication of God's displeasure with you.

While you admit that some of your attitudes and actions are intentionally sinful, you know that everything wrong with the world is not your fault. Economic woes, social struggles, illness and disease are not completely your responsibility but rules, sins, disappointment, and failure feel like coiled serpents lurking around the corner, ready to strike without a moment's warning.

Then you hear someone talk about God offering life that is somehow different from what you have experienced. He uses terms like "abundant," "full," and "complete." You see dramatic changes take place in the lives of people who listen to and follow this person even though your closest associates are suspicious of him and want to see him discredited. You are curious and want to learn more but you are afraid of what might happen if your friends and co-workers find out. You do just enough snooping to find out where he is staying and, when darkness falls, you slip through back alleys and empty lanes to reach the neighborhood where he is. Good fortune has it that he is outside. Cautiously you walk up to him, introduce yourself, and ask for a few moments of his time. As if he has been expecting you, he welcomes you warmly and eagerly talks.

Such was the world in which Nicodemus lived. Some of us live in that same world today. And while Jesus was a bit impatient with Nicodemus' inability to grasp the meaning of what he had been teaching, Jesus found a way to connect with Nicodemus' experience and help him understand why he had come into our lives. He reminded Nicodemus of that story of the snakes in the desert and how God saved his people through the bronze serpent on the pole. In the same way, he said, God will raise up his Messiah on a pole and all who look on him will be saved. Jesus knew that eventually his earthly life would end in the common and horrific practice of crucifixion, but he also knew that it would become a pathway to healing and life for the Jews and anyone else who would believe.

This morning on *Sing for Joy*, a radio program from St. Olaf College in Minnesota, I learned that at some point a serpent statue was erected on Mount Nebo, the traditional site of Moses' death. From that vantage point, Moses looked over into the Promised which he would never reach. In the same way, today you can look across the Jordan River valley into Israel. Off in the distance, just on the horizon, you can make out the city of Jerusalem where Jesus was raised on a cross and gave his life for us all.

With the serpent on a pole, God provided a means for the Hebrews to reclaim life even when they were in the throes of death because of a venomous snake bite. Through Jesus' death on a cross and his resurrection to life, God provided a means for everyone to reclaim life. As Jesus explained it to Nicodemus, "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. '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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'"

Nicodemus came to Jesus under cover of darkness because of his fear of being found out by his fellow Jews. That darkness also represents the fear, suffering, and uncertainty so many of us experience on a daily basis. Jesus invited him into the light of God's grace where the poisonous experiences of our lives have no lasting effect. He invited Nicodemus to look upon him as the Savior of the world and be cured of all the ills that sin and suffering can inflict on us.

Thousands of years ago, God pushed the Hebrew people into the desert for their own good. It ended their slavery and began their journey toward

freedom, freedom of the spirit as well as the body. It introduced them to their God and his protective love which watched over them. It helped them to learn how to trust their lives to God who gave them that life. The season of Lent is our wilderness journey. It is God's way of pushing us into a place where we have to deal with ourselves and God. It is an opportunity to evaluate life and seek God's help. It is a place where we can honestly assess our own illness of the soul and look to Jesus for healing and life.

Scripture is clear that God desires for us to live, not simply to exist. God desires that we live and enjoy all of the good things created for our benefit. We can do that if we will look to Christ who was raised on the cross, not as a symbol of death and defeat, but as a signpost to life. Look upon Jesus and allow whatever illness of body, mind, or spirit that afflicts you to be helped and healed by his abundant grace. Look to Jesus for life!

March 18, 2012

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

In this moment of worship, O Lord our God, quiet our frantic lives and open our hearts to the movement of your Spirit among us. The busy tasks of our days often distract us and turn our attention away from those things with eternal significance. In this season of Lent, O Lord, as we stand between the manger and the cross, teach us, once again, to be still and know that you are God. Focus our attention on our need for relationship with you and with one another. Heal our hurts and calm our souls so that as we become restored in you, we might also be challenged and inspired to reach out in your name to a hurting world.

O Lord, as we look at our world, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the need that we see. So many of our own number are sick. So many around the world are hungry or homeless or suffer persecution and violence. So many more need the hope and light that you can bring to their lives. We pray for your guidance and healing and mercy. Teach us to be diligent in working to meet the needs of others, to be constant in our prayers, and to be faithful in sharing the light of your hope and peace.

In this season when we focus on reflection and renewal, we are grateful, O God, for new beginnings and second chances. Even as we seek to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of your love for us through the gift of Jesus Christ, help us to see that you are not a god created in our human image, but the Creator who seeks to transform our lives and mold us in your image. Teach us to be merciful to one another as you have shown us mercy and to love one another as you have shown us how to love. In the name of the One whose life, death and resurrection bring us abundant life for today and hope for the days to come, we pray. Amen.

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