

“Snakes”

Numbers 21:4-9 & John 3:14-21

March 22, 2009

This week I read a story about a young boy from the deep south. Although it lacked some of the details that would assure me that it was actually something that had happened, it certainly was written as though it was a true story. Sammy was the young boy's name and the article talked about his love of fishing. It said that during the summer months the boy would go out and dig some worms almost every day and spend at least some time fishing. It usually took him some time to find enough worms for the days so he was really excited one day when he dug near an old tree stump and turned over a whole mess of worms - certainly enough for the day. He scooped them into his little bait bucket and was off to his favorite fishing hole within 15 minutes. When he grabbed the first worm to bait his hook he was surprised when it seemed to bite him a little - it stung - but no big deal, especially after he caught a nice catfish almost immediately. He put his catch on his stringer and grabbed for another worm. Again there was a little stinging bite but the fishing was great and in no time he had his second fish. Sammy noticed a little numbness in his hand and arm but the fishing was too good to really think much about that and so he just concentrated on doing what he loved to do and within an hour, he was amazed to see that he had 8 nice fish on his stringer. And even though he really wasn't ready to stop fishing, he decided that he had enough to carry home. On the walk home he was met by the local sheriff who was admiring his string of fish when he noticed that Sammy's arm was really swollen and red. As soon as Sammy began to tell about the great worms he had found the sheriff knew there was trouble and began to rush Sammy to the hospital. The worms were actually baby rattlesnakes and even though one bite from a baby rattler would not normally be deadly if cared for soon, bite after bite had allowed the poison to build up in his system. And the more fun Sammy had fishing - the more he ignored the growing problem. By the time the sheriff got him to the hospital, he died.

Snakes come into play in both the TO Lesson and today's Gospel. Moses is leading the Israelites across the desert toward what they imagined to be a land 'flowing with milk and honey'. But that promised land was not appearing quickly enough. The people are sick of the journey - sick of the food - sick of the long winter [well maybe that was not a concern] - sick of the struggle. It doesn't take long before they did what we often do the best - complain. They are mad at Moses and mad at God. And then the snakes begin to appear.

It is an interesting text with plenty of issues that would provide interesting discussion in a Bible Study setting. It is interesting to note that this seemingly weird call from God to design and build a bronze serpent on a pole led to healing for the people - a healing that so impressed them that they would carry that bronze snake with them through the rest of their wilderness wandering. And even after settling into the promised land, that pole with the snake attached became a part of the temple until it was destroyed hundreds of years later by King Hezekiah in the 7th century BC. Hezekiah believed that it had become an idol for the people and never had any real power. He believed that when the

people that had been bitten by the snakes in the wilderness and looked up to the serpent on the pole what they were really doing was looking up to God and returning in faith to God - that was the source of healing. And not only that - the Nehushtan, the name given to this snake on a pole, is believed to possibly have a connection to the 'Caduceus' the symbol with two snakes wrapped around a pole or the 'Rod of Asclepius' which has one snake on a pole - both symbols continue to be used in modern medical circles. Yet, I wonder how many time people look at those medical emblems and think of those ancient people complaining about their lives and turning against God. I wonder how often we see those medical insignias and think about Moses and the call to trust God and look up to that one who was hung on a pole.

It is weird stuff really - a strange connection that we continue to have with an Old Bible story and the call to trust God in times of struggle. How could looking up to a snake wound around a pole have any curative power when it comes to being poisoned by a snake bit? Yet, people way back then looked up and lived. And today people still go to those who are connected to the symbol of a snake wrapped around a pole. When those ancient people experienced healing they returned in faith to God. When they looked up and were healed, certainly they must have found themselves thinking about the power of a God who could do such thing - even through a snake on a pole. But then, that was the promise of God - 'Look up and live.'

The Gospel text begins with a comparison between Jesus being lifted up on the cross and the bronze snake in the wilderness. Looking up to Jesus the promise is of healing and life. Somehow we have come to accept this image of Jesus nailed to the cross without much question. We look at it, and if we are not too consumed with other things in our life, I suspect that we may well ponder what kind of power our God has that He is able to bring healing and life even through such a thing - a man lifted up on a pole. But then, that too was the promise of God, 'Look up, believe and you will live!'

I found myself thinking about those ancient Israelites traveling through the desert on the way to the promised land. I suspect that we would largely imagine them to be a pretty superstitious people. Still I am sure that even then not everyone would have been ready to believe in the healing power of a snake on a pole. Certainly it would be easier to believe in the power of the snake that had just bit them. I suspect that they could see the swelling and feel the burning from the bit. Perhaps, at least before they watched too many of their friends die from the snake bites, they might have even believed that they would not get too sick from the bit. After all what is a little snake bite. And what possible good would it do to look up to a snake on a pole? There is an old tale about a peasant who, while hoeing in his field during the spring thaw, came across a snake. He raised his hoe to kill it, but the snake begged for mercy. "I am too frozen to do you any harm," it cried. The farmer, full of compassion, picked up the half-dead serpent and put it into his tunic, against his chest. As he began to work, the snake got warmer and warmer. Suddenly, the snake bit the peasant. The peasant frantically reached into his tunic and pulled out the snake, throwing it to the ground. "Why?" asked the man, "I befriended you. I trusted you." "True!" hissed the snake as it slithered away, "but do not blame me. You knew I was a snake when you picked me up."

So what do we have here before us today? A little boy who was just to happy with what he was doing to really notice that those little stinging 'worms' were killing him. A

peasant who believed that the snake would not bit him. An ancient people who stopped trusting God and got caught up in complaining about their miserable life and dying in the wilderness. And the call comes to us again this Lenten season - "Look up and live". I wonder how often we forget about God and believe that the little sins that bit us just sting a little - nothing to worry about. I wonder if we think the evil we befriend will not hurt us? I wonder how often the situation of our life so consumes us that we stop trusting in God. Do we hear the call? "Look up and live!" AMEN