

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 14, 2021
“Love Lifted Up” (Numbers 2:4-9 and John 3:14-21)

As a child, my son, Ben, loved watching the *Indiana Jones* movies. I’ll admit that I still do. In fact, I spent a whole Sunday afternoon recently watching three of them. And it’s no wonder people enjoy them. They are filled with action and suspense from beginning to end.

Harrison Ford plays the fearless adventurer who keeps his cool in the face of every imaginable danger. Nothing frightens him; nothing, that is, except snakes. He hates snakes. Consequently, he constantly had to cross roomfuls of slithering serpents in pursuit of his quests.

Like Indiana Jones, very few of us have a great fondness for snakes because they invoke such frightful images. It has been that way since Adam and Eve had their unfortunate encounter with a certain serpent in the Garden of Eden.

In our first reading for today, we hear the story of the children of Israel encountering a plague of these sinister, slimy serpents in the wilderness. And this didn’t happen by chance. I mean, they didn’t just set up camp near a snake farm. Rather, the writer of Numbers tells us, God sent the poisonous serpents among them. As a result, many of the Israelites were bitten and they died.

But why would God do such a thing to the people with whom he had entered a covenant; to the nation he had set apart as his chosen people? Even though the Hebrews were special to God, the relationship between the two was not always harmonious. The people’s actions were not always consistent in maintaining their relationship with God. In fact, there were many ups and downs. The books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy relate many incidents of the people complaining, usually out of frustration over some aspect of their lives.

Typically, the people complained against Moses and Aaron. As the human leaders of the nation, it was natural that they would attract the bitterness of the people. The complaints were often a litany of yearning for their former life in Egypt, protests over the lack of food and water along the journey, and their disgust with manna. In general, they complained about the hardships they faced in the wilderness. In today’s reading, the people are once again disgusted with the food and want more water. However, their protests here are of a higher order. They not only complain to Moses, but to God, as well.

The people seem oblivious to all God has done for them: the rescue from the Egyptians, the escape through the Red Sea, provisions of water, quail and manna, not to mention the physical sign of God’s presence with the pillar of cloud by day and the column of fire by night. They are apparently unable to look at their situation, to be thankful for what they have been provided, and to trust that anything else needed will also be provided by God. So the Lord sends fiery serpents among them and they bite the people so that many Israelites die.

Some have suggested that the snakes were not so much punishment as they were a dramatic way for God to teach the people a lesson. As parents must discipline their children to correct their relationship, so God, the divine Father of the Hebrew nation, is forced to act in order to correct the thinking of the Israelite community as a whole. And he gets their attention.

The presence of the snakes and their deadly bite soon bring the people back to Moses, asking him to intercede on their behalf and pray for God to take away the serpents. But instead of driving off the snakes, God commands Moses to set up a sign: a bronze snake on a pole. Whenever anyone is bitten, all they have to do is to look up at the bronze snake and they will be healed.

What we see here is that rejection of God's goodness results in punishment, which leads to repentance and, finally, healing. Now we must understand that, in this situation, God acts out of both anger and mercy. There is punishment – which is well deserved – but there is also a blessing greater than that which was previously experienced. God's nature is to bless. When God must offer punishment, the punishment is itself an expression of loving correction to bring erring children back into the right way and give them something even greater than they had before. That's what God does here.

We must also understand that looking up at the serpent for healing is not some kind of sorcery or magic trick. The ancient Jewish rabbis were clear that it was not the serpent itself that healed, but what looking at the raised serpent made the people do. Whenever the people looked upward for help, submitting their hearts to their God in heaven, they were healed. The snake itself meant nothing. It was merely a way of getting the people's attention and helping them move their thoughts from their boring menu and their persistent plague to focusing their thoughts and hearts on the love and promise of a God who is greater than anything or anyone in the wilderness.

In setting this bronze serpent high on a pole to draw the people eyes and hearts upward, God takes something ugly and frightening and repulsive and transforms it into something wonderful. That ugly snake becomes an instrument that helps the people see that God still cares for them, still keeps his promise, and still loves them. This was a case of God's love lifted up.

In the gospel of John, we find a direct comparison between Moses lifting up the bronze snake and the lifting up of Christ himself. Just as looking at the bronze serpent saved the people of Israel from death, believing in Christ – who was raised up on an ugly cross to endure a violent, hideous death – saves you and me. It's a simple matter of trust. Our second lesson sums it up well: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.*

The cross is the most powerful and profound example of God's love lifted up: the sacrifice of his only begotten Son. In the gospel, we see once again that God is in the saving business. God is not interested in punishing or destroying sinners. Jesus says, *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* God's primary concern is that sinners be saved, and he puts his own life on the line in order to accomplish our salvation.

This seems way too easy, doesn't it? How can God let guilty people off by simply looking at a bronze snake? How can God bring salvation through faith? Shouldn't God require that people first set their lives straight and change their behavior before he is willing to save them? Of course, God could punish us long and hard until he broke our wills and forced us into submission. He could compel us to change our ways by threatening us with eternal damnation.

But how effective would such measures be?

God seeks a life of fellowship with his people. He desires us to enter into relationship with him whereby he is our Father and we are his children. And this is accomplished when we become motivated – not out of fear or punishment – but by our love for the God who first loved us.

Look again at the situation of the people in the wilderness. The threat of death by snakebite would have been a powerful motivation for the people. God could have offered them a bargain whereby those who repented, and cleaned up their lives, and behaved themselves would have been spared from this awful death. But in that case, the change in behavior would have been motivated by fear and self-preservation. The people would not have been truly changed. They would not have been motivated by their love for God, only their fear of him. And only their outward behavior would have changed, not the inner motivation of their hearts. But by offering them the bronze serpent, with the promise that anyone who looks at it would live, God gave them a concrete symbol of his forgiving love and concern for his people. They learned that by looking to God and entrusting their hearts and souls and lives to him, the broken relationship caused by their sin and constant complaining could be restored.

God doesn't beat his people over the head with the law. He loves us, he forgives us, he brings us hope and healing so that we, too, will desire nothing more than to be in relationship with him and do his will gladly and freely, without any compulsion. God knows that the change of the heart – that is, the inner self of a person – comes only when we are drawn out of ourselves by a love that comes from beyond us. This is the kind of love God lifts up. In the wilderness, the bronze serpent was the symbol of such love. For us, it is the cross. But we cannot comprehend its full meaning until we realize that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.