

John 3:14-21, Lent 4

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and from the Son, our crucified Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Let us pray: Gracious Lord, stir up the Holy Spirit within us to open our eyes to see the mercy and grace you have shown us through the giving of your Son to die for our salvation. Amen.

What do you think about snakes? Snakes are slithery and sneaky. They have sharp fangs and go around sticking out their tongues all the time. Snakes are usually hiding somewhere and we often don't even see them until we're too close for comfort. For the most part, people don't like snakes very much.

Our dislike of these long-bodied, limbless reptiles is evident in the ways we refer to them in our language. Someone who is sneaky or is a troublemaker is described as a "Snake in the grass." When a person has a bad experience we sometimes say that they've been "snakebit." Even in movies and TV, snakes are used to make the audience squirm. Indiana Jones faced a pit full of venomous vipers in his search for the Lost Ark, and in old westerns even the bravest of horses would throw their riders to the ground when faced with a deadly "rattler."

From the Garden of Eden, where the serpent deceived Adam and Eve into thinking they could be like God, to Psalm 58 where the wicked are described as having "venom like a serpent", snakes have represented evil and evil persons in biblical writings. In Proverbs 23:32 the writer even describes the dangers of drinking too much alcohol by saying, "At the last it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder." That verse sounds like it must have been written by someone who experienced a whopper of a hangover or two in his time!

Snakes, for the most part, are disliked and even dreaded. They're symbols of fear and evil and everything we don't like. Is it any wonder, then, that when the people of Israel forgot the

blessing of their exodus from Egypt and began to grumble against God, that God sent snakes to get them back on track? Just imagine God looking down on us and, hearing all our petty complaints, God decides to send a few hundred copperheads and rattlesnakes in here to get our attention. It'd sure be enough to make me realize the error of my ways! What do we think about snakes? We don't like snakes because snakes make us uncomfortable.

/ Now, another question; What do you think about seeing Jesus lifted up on the cross? I'm not asking what you think about seeing the cross, but about seeing Jesus, nails through his hands and feet, a crown of thorns on his head, with the wound of the soldier's spear in his side, hanging on the cross with his arms outstretched as he takes his last gasping breath. How does the image of Christ on the cross make you feel? (*Place picture on cross.*)

Most of us are quite comfortable with seeing the cross everywhere look, without Jesus on it of course. We wear the cross on necklaces, earrings, and all kinds of jewelry. The faithful and the unfaithful alike adorn themselves with crosses in one form or another. Silver crosses, wooden crosses, and stained glass crosses decorate all kinds of religious buildings, and even some not so religious ones. The cross without Christ is easy to look at, not much to think about.

We have all kinds of reasons why we prefer to see the empty cross rather than see Christ in connection with the way he died. For many of us, the empty cross represents Jesus' victory over sin and the grave by overcoming the power of death on the cross. He's no longer there, we say, because he has ascended into heaven and waits for us to join him there. That's one of the more legitimate reasons we have for preferring to see the cross without Christ. But whatever reason we give for not wanting to see Jesus in his last suffering hours before his death, I think it often boils down to the fact that Christ on the cross makes us uncomfortable. But it is precisely that vision that makes us so uncomfortable that Jesus is referring to when he says, "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."

You see, when God sent those serpents among the people of Israel, it wasn't just for punishment or revenge. It wasn't as if God were saying, ^{If you don't stop crying} "~~You wanna cry~~, I'll give you something to cry about!" God sent those serpents to make the people realize that what they were doing was wrong and to lead them to repent and ask God's forgiveness for their sins. Once the people showed their desire to turn back to God he told Moses how to give them the means to be healed.

God told Moses to make a poisonous serpent, the very symbol of evil and fear that makes us so uncomfortable. God told Moses to lift up that symbol of death that had caused the Israelites to repent, and that anyone who looked on that snake would be healed, not by the magic of the snake, but by the grace of God. Because of God's love for his people, he changed that image of suffering and death into the means of grace by which the people could be put back into a right relationship with God. The serpent on a pole, the image that made the people so uncomfortable, lifted up for the people to look upon, was God's means of grace for healing the split between God's people and their Creator.

"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." Why did God send his son Jesus into the corrupt and sinful world of humanity and give him up to a cruel death on a cross? So that "whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Jesus became the means by which God, in God's grace, heals the split between our Creator and us. When we realize the sinfulness of our ways, when we repent and pray to God to forgive us, look upon Jesus lifted up on the cross, then believe in, and put our faith and trust in him, God, in God's grace, saves us from death and promises us eternal life in God's kingdom. The Son of God

on a cross, the image that makes us so uncomfortable, lifted up for us to look upon, is God's means of grace for healing the split between us and our Creator.

The Israelites eventually strayed again and began to worship the bronze serpent itself instead of worshipping God who saved them from themselves time after time. We too, are in danger of losing sight of the whole meaning of Christ's death on the cross and falling into the trap of worshipping the cross itself. During this season of Lent, we talk about the cross, we contemplate the cross, and we look to the cross as a sign of God's love for us. But we're still uncomfortable seeing Jesus lifted up on that cross. We get squeamish when we think of the agony he must've gone through for our salvation. Christ on the cross makes us squirm because it forces us to think about ourselves as the reason for his death.

Sometimes we're told that we should look beyond the cross to see God's love. I say we should look directly at the cross, and at Jesus lifted up there for us, if we really want to see God's love. Martin Luther called it the theology cross that we see God not in the glory of the world, but hidden in Christ on the cross, dying there for our salvation. It is not the cross itself, but the grace of God shown in the death of his own Son on the cross, that saves us.

Jesus said, "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." Not because God wants to show us what bad and disobedient children we are. Not because God wants to "give us something to cry about." But because, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Amen.