

Numbers 21: 4-9
John 14-21
March 15, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Among the delightfully strange stories in the Bible is the one we heard from the Book of Numbers. Israel is in the process of invading the land of Canaan. One by one the tribes who they encounter come out to meet them and are utterly defeated. They are nearing their promised destination. But then they take a detour to avoid the lands of Edom. And there they are again by the shores of the Red Sea. In what must be a massive understatement the scripture says, "The people became impatient." The people again begin to complain. "Look where all Moses' promises have gotten us! We are almost back to where we started! What kind of leadership is this? And by the way we are sick of manna and quail every day... No doubt there were people who claimed, "If you follow me I will lead you straight to the Promised Land with none of this wandering about."

As has happened so many times already, God's anger breaks out. This time a swarm of poisonous snakes appear and attack the people who are grumbling against Moses. People who were complaining about the route to the Promised Land and the terrible food are now dying. Again, as has happened so often the people come running to Moses. "We are so sorry! We have sinned! Make these snakes go away!" Now here comes the best part. God tells Moses to make an image of a poisonous snake out of

metal and put it on a pole and lift it up. Fortunately Moses has a blazing forge at hand and is able to melt the metal, let it cool to the point that it can be molded into the image of a snake. He then puts the image on a pole and lifts it up. He tells the people to take their eyes off of the snakes and look to the image on the pole. If they do this they will live.

Now aside from the wonderfully weird nature of the story there is an obvious theological problem. I wonder if you can spot it. It has to do with the first commandment, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall have no other gods before me." Then there is the one that says, "You shall make no visible images of gods and fall down and worship them." Ask me about this at the Bible class.

For all the fun I am having with this episode there is a profound truth at the core of the story. For whatever reason and however it happened, when the people lifted their eyes off of the snakes and toward the image lifted high on the pole, they were saved. And it is clear that this story was very familiar to Jesus and to the people of his time. We know this because when in John's gospel Jesus announces that "...just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness" life" he expects that his hearers' will be familiar with the story.

What they probably did not understand was the bit about “....so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” It was only after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection that it was possible to make the connection.

Not to put too fine a point on it, Jesus is identifying himself with the snake on the pole. For Jesus the pole will be a cross. You may think that linking his death on the cross with the image on a snake is creepy and maybe offensive. Well...*it is!* There is nothing pretty about the cross or what it represents. We may cringe at the lurid depictions of Jesus on a crucifix or in the Mel Gibson movie. Our instinct is to turn away from the horror and the cruelty. There is our outrage at innocent suffering; while at the same time we look in vain for leaders who will lead us to inexorable victory. We may give respect to a crucified messiah; but in this life we want someone with a little more influence in the *so-called real world*. It is no mystery why there are more people in church on Easter Sunday than Maundy Thursday or Good Friday. We humans—and I am no different want to fast forward through the pain and ugliness of the cross—or bypass it altogether.

Yet when we do this we are left the problem of the snakes. Somehow avoiding the cross and going straight to “He is risen” hasn’t gotten rid of the snakes. They are all around. We know them as worry about the future; anxiety about our financial security; fear of the loss of loved ones and important relationships; guilt over past hurtful behavior; remorse over unfulfilled promises; anger and self-pity over wrongs done to us;

the things that keep us awake at night or which greet us when we awake. I could go on and expand this list. Needless to say snakes are everywhere and we know the effect of their poison.

The gospel of Mark captures this reality when, at the empty tomb, the angel tells the disciples, "He is risen! He is not here!" Exactly so. When the snakes are biting we hear "he is risen." We experience, "*he is not here!*" When we experience Jesus as *not here*, we are beset by the snakes. We spend our energy trying to keep them at bay. It is fearful exhausting work. In the secret places of our hearts we wonder how long we will hold out and which of the snakes will finally get to us. What is the remedy?

There really is only one. We must come to the cross. We must lift up our eyes off of all that is threatening and frightening. We must lift up our eyes to the one who is lifted up, just as the snake was lifted up. And here is the most important part. *We must want to live! We must be willing to believe that the one on the cross is more powerful than the poisonous snakes! We must believe in the power of Jesus death to bring us life more than the power of the snakes to kill us. We must lift up our eyes in faith and trust that, just as the Son of Man was lifted up, so shall we be freed to live life in freedom and joy. Amen.*