

Lent4_YrB_031515_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God, who loved the world so much. Amen.

Yesterday morning, the guy who cuts our grass called to say he was home from his offshore job and to ask if he could come and cut the yard. After a week of lousy weather and too much rain, the backyard weeds seemed to have overtaken what grass there was, growing exponentially taller every night. Since the yard had been underwater for days, we tried to put him off, but he said he was being called back out to the boat tomorrow and it was now or not for another three or four weeks. We said, "Come on!"

When he was finished, there were muddy tire tracks resembling crop circles in the small space of the back yard, but the weeds looked - at least temporarily - vanquished. The sun was out and the air was cool. I decided to pull up the shades in the back room and open the windows. As I looked out on the yard, I saw what I realized was a small snake, totally still, on top of the short blades of grass a few feet from the windows, enjoying the warmth of a sun that we hadn't seen for days.

Now when I lived in Daphne, near the edge of some woods, seeing a snake in the yard was not an unusual occurrence. But I live in the big city now, less than a mile from the Mall, as the crow flies, so this was a surprise to me! Not really a scary thing, given its size, but a concern. The dogs and cats were inside, though, and it was time to go to breakfast, so I left the snake in its sunny spot.

When I came back to the window after breakfast, the snake had moved a little bit toward the carport, so I went outside to look at it. It was maybe 12-15" long, and about as big around as my little finger. I'm not particularly a fan of snakes, especially if they are large, but this one seemed to be manageable, and I didn't want the pets to find it and have their way with it or decide to bring it in as a present. So I gently picked it up - not too close to its head - and handed it over the fence gate to Frances (who was willing to take it) and she put it in the side yard near the strawberry plants. (I figure I'm safe, since she is the gardener!)

What is it with snakes and people? Does it harken all the way back to the beginning, with the story of the serpent in the Garden of Eden? Who knows? But ancient lore is full of snakes, serpents and their close cousins, dragons.

Take today's story from the Hebrew Testament:

The Hebrews, after escaping from slavery in Egypt, have gone into the wilderness between Egypt and 'the land of promise,' and are grumbling and complaining to Moses about lack of food, lack of water, lack of all the amenities they remember from Egypt, despite the untruth of those memories. What they really had there were 'bricks without straw,' not bellies full of bread.

As they wander deeper and deeper into the desolation of the Sinai desert, they become impatient and start to whine, wishing they were anywhere but where they are. They cry out to Moses, asking him why he has brought them out of Egypt only to die in the wilderness. There is no food or water, they say, and the food (which they supposedly don't have) is miserable. Apparently quail and manna, quail and manna, quail and manna don't provide them with enough variety. Bring on the BBQ! Bring on the steak and potatoes! Bring on the chocolate pie!

Well, YHWH isn't too impressed with their demands for an expanded menu, because what they get instead are 'poisonous serpents' that bite them and cause them to die. The scary biting snakes and the dead Israelites convince the Israelites who haven't been bitten yet, that they have gone too far. "We have sinned!" they cry out to Moses. "Pray to YHWH to take the snakes away from us!"

Moses prays, and YHWH tells him to make a snake out of bronze and put it on a pole. And everyone who gets bitten should look at the bronze snake and they will live. And that is what happens.

Which brings us to the Gospel lesson for today.

Jesus says to Nicodemus, with whom he has been having a conversation about being born again, "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." What does the bronze serpent have to do with Jesus? Raymond Brown says that when Jesus is lifted up on the cross, is raised up from death, and finally, is lifted up to heaven - the lifting up of Jesus is reminiscent of Moses' lifting up the snake on the pole, saving us as the bronze serpent saved the Israelites who looked upon it.

Then Jesus, perhaps knowing that if he rephrased his comment, it would become known to Christians around the world as 'John 3:16,' says, "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." At the very least, it is a verse that even those of us who never did Bible Drills in Sunday School can recite!

But it is a pesky little verse, not just because of its appearance at countless sporting events and other gatherings, but also because, although many of us can quote it, we only know how all those people who hold up the John 3:16 signs interpret the words. Unfortunately, many Christians use this verse as a sort of magic formula: if you can recite it on cue, you'll be saved. They twist it to mean that if you believe the way they want you to believe you'll be saved; if you don't you will perish.

In the Reformation, Luther called this verse 'the Gospel in a nutshell' - that is, that God is fundamentally a God of love, that love is the logic by which the kingdom of God runs, and that God's love trumps everything else, even justice, in the end.

Of course, not everyone interprets it that way, as I said, but in the next verse 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." Period. And the 'judgment' to come is not punishment, as we usually hear that word, but is instead the crisis that occurs when those who are in darkness will not come out for fear of the light. But God comes to redeem us all, through absolute vulnerability and sacrifice. In the face of such love, such sacrifice, we must surrender all of our claims to power or prestige.

This may be hard to take. It may frighten us sometimes to think of being so utterly dependent on God. But maybe as we remember God's persistent love for us, we might also realize that, precisely because this is the one relationship in our lives over which we have no power, it is also the one relationship we cannot screw up! God created the relationship with us, God loves us, and God sustains the relationship. We cannot secure our destiny or save our lives. Only God can do that. Only love can do that.

So maybe we should look for another verse to flash at football games. How about Micah 6:8? *"God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."*

Or how about the Great Commandments: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

They are not verses to which we give only lip service. But they will teach us to love as God loves. May we learn to love the world in this way - as God so loves the world.