

Sermon, Sunday, March 7
Rev. Dr. Rodney Kennedy

Snake on A Stick; Savior on A Cross
Numbers 21:4-9

Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

What an odd, terrible, scary, crazy story. Stories like this one are one of the reasons I have such a complicated relationship with the Bible. This is no bedtime story for children. This is even more awful than your mother teaching you to pray,

"And if I should die before I wake."
"What? Die? You want me to pray about dying before morning?"

Like Indiana Jones I'm asking, "Why does it always have to be snakes?" You may not have noticed by we have more snakes in the Bible than in Harry Potter? There's the talking snake in the garden, there's the rod of Moses that God turned into a hissing snake and told Moses to pick it up. Moses was reluctant to pick up that snake by the tail and

"Pick it up Moses!"
"Lord, you haven't lived here very long or you would know
that you
never pick up a hissing snake by its . . .

"PICK IT UP MOSES"

Moses picked up the snake and it became a road again. There's the bronze snake in the wilderness, the bronze snake saved and used as an object of worship in Israel's Temple. Jesus brings up snakes: "You **snakes**, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?"

In the spurious ending to Mark's Gospel there is even alleged words from Jesus telling his followers they can pick up snakes and not be harmed. These verses gave rise to the snake-handling tradition of the Appalachachian mountains in our own country. Will Campbell tells the story of 3 Army buddies attending a service in a country church, and when the preacher brought

out the rattlesnakes, one of them said, "I'm outta here out the back door." "This church doesn't have a back door." "Well, where do you think they want it?"

When it comes to snakes, you have to know to watch your step. In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone reports that a black person had "to watch his step" all the time. A group of white people could show up around any corner at any moment and for a perceived insult they could get a rope, throw it over an oak tree limb, and lynch the black man.

God using a bronze snake to cure his people is odd, but it wasn't intended to be a lasting memorial or an object of worship. The snake on a stick was a one-time magical cure. The lamb on the cross was God's answer to evil and the salvation of the world. The snake lifted up in the wilderness is a weird story; Jesus lifted up on the cross gets mixed reviews. This is just a weird, scary story, and I don't like snakes.

The text says that God sent the snakes because the people were complaining about Moses, but people often engage in bad theology when bad things happen. Even Scripture writers could be guilty of misreading actions and putting the blame on God. Blaming God is an avocation for some preachers and atheists. When Katrina blasted New Orleans, the preachers said, "God sent the storm to punish the city of sin." The atheists said, "This proves that God is capricious." How odd of people who say there is no God, to suddenly blame God for a storm.

The text hints that Moses brought the snakes to punish the people. Now, there's a thought for a preacher: But I don't linger over the thought of being able to say, "At my command bring the snakes." A church full of snakes ought to be sufficient cause to discourage complaining about the preacher.

So what happened? Moses prayed and asked God to get rid of the snakes. Instead of getting rid of the snakes, God told Moses to make a replica of a poisonous serpent, set it on a pole, and if anyone bitten by a serpent looked upon the snake they would live. What an odd way of saving a people – a bronze snake on a stick.

"Look at the snake on a stick and live." **It sounds crazy, doesn't it?** Our survival depends upon learning how to trust God's mercy enough to look up instead of down. Why are so many of you are looking down this morning, down on yourself, down on the present, down on the future? Looking up is the way of God' people especially in the middle of hardships, tribulations, and pandemics.

Moses tears around the camp, shouting "Look at the bronze snake and live!" The snake on the pole stands for death – all the death in the world – but God turns it into life. I hear Jesus saying, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, and whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Later, Jesus says, "I will be lifted up from the earth and draw all people to me." We must look on this man's death if we are to have life. God turns death into life. That's good enough for me.

There's one big mistake: The Israelites saved the snake on a stick. They packed it with the luggage and carried it to the Promised Land. It shows up in the 7th century in the house of God as an idol. It's become a museum piece. There's no telling what God's people will cling to and drag around after it has lost all practical usefulness – a literal creation, an inerrant Bible, a script of doctrinal answers, a male clergy. God gives us gifts and we, subtle that we are, turn them into idols. A later ruler of Israel has the snake removed and destroyed. No snakes in God's house. Getting rid of idols becomes a primary task of the church.

Look! Look! And be saved! There's more to looking than meets the eyes. Looking is not just seeing. Hearing in the Bible means listening and obeying; looking means seeing and participating. We have to participate in the cross.

That God would save the world with a son on a pair of sticks on a garbage pile sounds as crazy as a snake on a stick bringing healing. God has made God's mark on the world of death with a Son on a pair of sticks. Tilt the cross to the side and it becomes an X – it becomes God's mark. And as the atheist Strang tells his son in the Broadway play *Equus*, "The cross can mark a man for life." And so it is. We are to bear the mark of the cross, the sign of the cross, saying to all who meet us on the road that we belong to Jesus. We participate in his life, death, and resurrection. We are his people. **Sounds crazy doesn't it?**

In the dramatic NETFLIX series, *House of Cards*, President Frank Underwood is in a church, speaking with a priest, and he says something that resonates with his power-hungry character. Looking at a large crucifix, he says, "I understand the Old Testament God, whose power is absolute, who rules through fear. But him, he turns to the crucifix . . . Love. That's what you're selling. Well, I don't buy it." To the brutal, the powerful, the Machiavellian, the love of God doesn't make sense.

Look at the cross and participate in its suffering. That is faith. That is life-giving. Jesus is lifted up on high, exalted to the right hand of the Father, and then he draws us to him. Being lifted up we have access to the throne of grace where we may receive mercy. When Paul reaches for words to describe what happens on the cross he puts it in terms of life and death: "You were dead But God who is rich in mercy made us alive together with Christ." Then, as if he can't wait for the punch line, Paul injects, "by grace you have been saved."

To look and believe are inseparable. **Lent helps Christians look inward and outward and we must see that the cross is not empty.** Jesus died on the cross. Protestants, given our Gnostic "default setting" like our crosses decorative, in bronze or gold or silver. Do you sense where this is going? We like our cross to be empty and slick so we don't have to look on the man's death. That snake on a stick required the people to look on death in order to live. The empty cross favored by Protestants has its own peculiar problems, but neither can a crucifix ensure Catholics will avoid looking on the cross as a spectator. We can have a crucifix and still think that the cross has nothing to do with us only something to do with God.

We are not allowed to be passive spectators only active participants. Are we ready to say with St. Paul, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead"? Even now, we are more likely to be spectators and so casual about our gathering in the name of the crucified God. Even now, the cross seems as folly to church members and as weakness in a world addicted to political power of the deathly sort.

By participating in Jesus' suffering and death, we are a people bronzed and lifted up by God so that the world may see there is an alternative to being captives of death. We are free to be the light of the world. No longer frightened we can embrace the outcast and the enemy, be free to walk the wilderness without fear of snakes. Everything is possible to those who look to him who is the eternal dispenser of freedom and life.

We are invited to eat this bread and drink this wine which becomes for us Christ's body and blood. In this meal we are consumed by what we consume, and therefore we participate in the mystery of God's salvation of the world. We become the sacrament that the frightened world so desperately needs. How odd, how mysterious, but, oh my, how powerful!