

SERMON 925

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 15, 2015

989th Week as Priest

816th Week at St Dunstan's

81st Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

SERPENT OF BRONZE

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

I have been tracing the appearance of serpents in the Holy Scriptures since I began studying the lectionary last week. I was curious and quite puzzled to find serpents used in ways both very negatively and as an influence for good.

You'll have to give me a few minutes to explain what I mean.

We are all familiar with the serpent's first appearance in the third chapter of Genesis:

Now the snake or serpent was the most clever shrewd; cunning; crafty of all the wild animals the Lord God had made. One day the snake said to the woman, "Did God really say that you must not eat fruit from any tree in the garden?"

Well, guess what? He was a liar and a trickster, and his aim was to bring down the human beings. And that is precisely what the serpent did.

In medieval art, the Genesis serpent stands on his back legs and has small arms and hands. I imagine him speaking with a hiss. And please be aware, as if for the first time, this snake can talk! The serpent was the most crafty of all the animals, but he could talk, for heaven's sake!

Why did God allow the snake to talk to Eve? Not only did he talk, but he spoke words of deceit and evil:

So the snake said to the woman, "You will most certainly not die. For God knows that if you eat the fruit from that tree, if you eat from it, your eyes will be opened and you will learn about and experience; and know about good and evil and you will be like God!"

You know what happened. The serpent won the battle of wits. Adam and Eve sinned, and God's judgment upon them was final. God cursed the snake and said that he would have to crawl on the ground and be the sworn enemy of man.

The moral of the story is this: "Avoid the snakes," which is not original with me; my good friend George Littleton attributes his father, one of my favorite English professors, with the words.

So, let me right now tell you the unvarnished truth: I am afraid of snakes. I always have been, and I will always be afraid of snakes. And you should know that Indiana Jones was afraid of snakes too. And he was a *hero*.

When I was a Boy Scout, we were camping on the Horseshoe Bend Trail and ran across a six-foot rattlesnake. We killed and barbecued that snake and ate him. It wasn't that good, but at least I could say that I had eaten rattlesnake.

I was a Sigma Nu in my undergraduate years at Auburn. There are lots of secret signs, handshakes, expressions, and such that I can't tell you—but I will tell you that our ordinary name was “the snakes.” I was never comfortable with that. And by the way, the symbol for the medical profession, the *caduceus*, includes two snakes wrapped around a pole.

The Bible mentions serpents and snakes a total of sixty times in the Old and New Testaments. I always thought that there was a Proverb that said, “The only good snake is a dead snake,” but that's not in the Bible.

Early in the Book of Exodus, the Lord says to Moses, “What is that in your hand?” Moses answers, “It is my walking stick, my staff; it represents the presence of

God.” “I know that,” said the Lord. “Throw it on the ground.” So Moses threw it on the ground, and it became a snake, a serpent. Moses ran away from the snake, which is exactly what I would have done, but the Lord said to him, “Reach out, Moses, and send out your hand and grab that snake by the tail.” When Moses reached out and snatched the snake, it again became a stick, that original staff in his hand. The Lord said,

This is so that the Israelites will believe and trust that the Lord appeared to you. I am the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

So a little later in the Book of Exodus, Moses has returned to Egypt to face the Pharaoh. The Pharaoh asks him to perform a miracle, or a wonder, take your pick. Moses tells his brother Aaron to take his walking stick and throw it down in front of Pharaoh. Lo and behold, it becomes a serpent. This was very impressive to the Egyptians. Serpents were symbols of dangerous power in Egypt; Pharaoh’s headdress had a serpent on its crest.

This is a bit off the subject, but did you know that there was a giant snake in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*? His name is the Basilisk, and he is the king of serpents. He can kill you just by looking at you. And one of the student societies is called “Slitherin,” which should make you think of a serpent slithering on the ground. I

think that J.K. Rowling must have been reading the Bible.

The prophet Isaiah also spoke of snakes in his vision of the peaceable kingdom:

The wolf and the lamb will eat together in peace graze together. The lion will eat hay like an ox, and a snake on the ground will not hurt anyone; the serpent's food will be dust; They will not hurt or destroy each other on all my holy mountain.

So why does God use the fiery serpent on a pole to save his people in our reading for today? The people have disobeyed God and Moses, and they do nothing but complain and bellyache about the food. God sends bronze serpents into their camp and many of the people die of snakebites. Moses asks God for mercy, and God tells him to make a graven image of a snake and put it on his walking stick. Now when the people are bitten, they look at the bronze serpent and are healed! Moses is the man! But why use the snake, a symbol of evil, to cure those bitten by snakes?

Now we come to the Gospel lesson from John. By the way, John's shield has the figure of a serpent wrapped around a chalice. Apparently someone tried to poison John with snake venom, and the Lord saved him!

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness; so the Son of Man must also be lifted up.” It’s an allusion to the cross and resurrection. And he is saying that everyone who believes in him can have eternal life. But why would Jesus compare the serpent of bronze to his own crucifixion? I think I know the answer: *If you want to get somebody’s full attention, tell them a story about snakes.* They won’t forget it.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says, “Behold, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. So be as clever and wise as serpents. Be as shrewd and cunning as snakes. But also be innocent and harmless as doves.” Then Jesus turns to the Pharisees and says to them:

You are snakes and serpents! A family of poisonous snakes, a brood of vipers! How are you going to escape God’s judgment?

Jesus is not done with them. He says,

You are wise men, teachers, scribes, experts in the law. And yet some of you will kill and crucify. Some of you will flog innocent people in your synagogues and hunt them down from town to town."

They do seem like snakes, a brood of vipers. In fact, people seem to have the ability to be gentle as doves *and* wily as serpents. I believe that it comes down to a choice that each of us has to make, a thousand times a day—to choose life and blessing, rather than death and cursing.

To choose good over evil, love rather than hate, Jesus Christ over the serpents. Yes, that's it. It comes down to avoiding the snakes. **AMEN.**