

Look and Live

Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-16

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March 27, 2011

Once I led a group of kids from the church to the Bronx Zoo. Right after we saw the gorillas, we went into the Reptile House. One of the first glass cases we came to had a snake curled up against the glass, red, fleshy, thicker around than my fist. That was nothing compared to the display marked “the largest snake in the United States”: a python as thick as my thigh, which looked as if it could have been digesting a goat for lunch. In other glass cases were all manner of poisonous snakes, including the rattlesnakes and copperheads that used to haunt my walks through the Arkansas woods near my grandfather’s place. Occasionally you’d see a sign on the glass: “Please don’t tap on the glass. What would you do if it broke?” Good question. [It was only *after* the sermon that I was informed that a cobra had *just* escaped from this very facility!]

Becca’s little brother used to keep snakes as pets, from a very young age right up until he got married. When he was ten years old or so, he lost a boa constrictor in the parsonage, and it was never found. Becca’s mother never quite got used to the idea that there was a snake loose in the house. I don’t think I would, either.

There is a story in the book of Numbers about snakes loose in the camp where the people of Israel were living in the desert. God had saved these people from slavery in Egypt. He had made himself known to them and given them his law as a gift. He had provided food for them. But the people complained against God: “We hate this disgusting manna!” The problem was not just that they were ungrateful; the problem was that they did not trust God. They thought they had a better idea than God. Do you ever think that way? The people of Israel in the desert were saying to God, “You messed up. We don’t trust you. We’re not going to follow you. We’d rather be slaves than follow you.”

God had heard this over and over, and he’d had enough. The people rebelled against his authority one time too many, so he sent a punishment for their sin. He sent snakes. This is not God’s normal way of punishing us, but this time he sent poisonous snakes. These snakes were called “burners” because their bite burned like fire shooting up your veins. Many people were bit, and many people died. This story is not about being rescued from a natural hazard. This is a story about the judgment of God. The snakes were sent as a just punishment for people who had rebelled against God. The purpose of the snakes was not simply to kill individuals, but to cause the people to turn back to God. And that is what happened. The people said to Moses, “We have sinned. Ask God to take away the snakes.”

Sometimes it takes a snake to get our attention. A story is told about a country pastor trying to reach a farmer with three sons — Jim, John, and Sam—who had never been to church. They had no interest in God at all. But one day Sam was bitten by a rattlesnake. The doctor couldn’t help him, and it looked like he would die, so they called the pastor. When he came, he began to pray (he was more honest than most pastors): “Father, we thank you that in your wisdom you sent this rattlesnake to bite Sam. Nothing else has ever been able to prompt him to pray or even acknowledge your existence. We trust that this experience will lead to repentance. And now, Father, we ask that you send another rattlesnake to bite Jim, and another to bite John, and a really big one to bite the old man. For years we’ve done everything we could to get them to

turn to you, but all in vain. What all our efforts could not do, this rattlesnake has done. We conclude that the only thing that will do this family any real good is rattlesnakes; so Lord, send us bigger and better rattlesnakes. Amen.”

The snakes in the desert did turn the people back to God, and as a group they said they were sorry. But it was not good enough that they as a nation said they repented. Each person needed to turn to God in faith. Here is what God did: he told Moses to make a replica of a poisonous snake and put it on top of a pole. Whoever looked at it would live. So Moses made a snake of bronze, and placed it on a pole, and lifted it up above the camp for all to see. Those who were bitten were not saved automatically. They had to exercise that little bit of faith, they had to believe enough to turn personally and look at that snake. If they looked, they lived. Of course it was not the snake that saved them. The ancient book known as *The Wisdom of Solomon* (16:7) says “The one who turned toward it was saved, not by the thing that was beheld, but by you [God], the Savior of all.” The God who sent the judgment also gave a way to be saved from his judgment. The story in the Bible assumes that the people deserved the judgment. What is surprising is that God himself provided a way for people to be saved from the death they deserve.

Imagine that you’re in that camp in the desert when the snakes have come. There is no defense from them. They sneak into your tent at night. They hide in your shoes. They crawl out from under the rock you’re sitting on. All around you people are dying. Moses comes, walking through the camp with the bronze snake on a pole, carrying it around like a soldier with a flagpole, and he cries out to the people who are dying, “Look! Look! Look and live!”

Not everyone who has been bitten will live. Some will never hear about the bronze snake before they die. Some doubt that it will work. They don’t see how it’s possible that looking at a replica of a snake could stop the poison, so they do not bother to look. Some laugh out loud in disbelief: “It’s absurd! Ridiculous! Who is Moses kidding?” Some feel that such magic is beneath them; they call for doctors and put their trust in science. Some feel that they are too far gone. What’s the use? The poison is all through my body now. So they do not look. Some put off looking; “I’m not sick yet” -- but they *will* be. They will feel the poison burning soon enough, and they will wish they had looked. But for now, they turn away from Moses. They stay in their tents, dying, whether they know it or not, and all the while the one way to be saved is right there if they will only turn to it and look.

Now we can understand how Jesus used that story in John 3:14: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.” Jesus himself was lifted up on a pole like that bronze serpent. He became a symbol of death that could save from death—and anyone who looks to Jesus, who trusts in him, can have eternal life.

Does that comparison really work for us? If we have a problem with John 3:16, it is usually with the idea that anyone should perish. Why would God send my friend to hell when she’s a good person? But the point in the wilderness is not that good people are saved and bad people die from snakebite. The point is that we are all condemned because we are part of a rebellious species. Yes, God sent the snakes into the camp just as God sent death into the world. God chose to make a world in which we all die; we all perish. It is not, John says, that Jesus came to condemn us. We were already condemned. Jesus came to save us from the death sentence we had already received. Why were we condemned? Not, according to this explanation, because we have sinned, but because we have not believed in the only source of life there is. God has made eternal life available to all, just as he made physical life available to the snakebit in the camp. If we are condemned, it is because we have condemned ourselves by refusing eternal life.

Some of us object to the whole idea that God has a right to condemn us. One way to deal with that objection is to do what Paul does in Romans: he asks whether a created thing like a pot can say to the potter that he is doing something wrong. But John does a kind of end run around the objection. The judgment here is not God's. The judgment is ours. We are the ones who have chosen for ourselves to accept eternal life—the life of the new age—or not. And our situation is compared not to a defendant in a court but to a person who has been contaminated with a fatal toxin. Whether we live or die has nothing to do with whether we are good or bad. Humans are creatures who have been infected by death. Jesus comes offering a good infection, as C. S. Lewis described eternal life. He is the only antivenom. Take it or leave it.

There are two questions that you have to answer this morning.

1. Are you dying? Remember, this comes in the story about Nicodemus, a very religious man. Jesus says that even good religious people who do not believe in him are “perishing.” John 3:16 doesn't mean anything if you don't understand that you are dying. We are like people who have been bitten by a snake.

Charles Spurgeon, the 19th century British preacher, quoted newspaper reports about a keeper of the snake exhibit in the London Zoo who had too much to drink one night and went back to his workplace. He felt that he was invulnerable, and began to pick up various snakes just to play with them. He would take them out of their cages and let them wrap themselves around his arm. The assistant snake-keeper began to be worried when his boss came to the exhibits of poisonous snakes, but the man would not be dissuaded. Finally he came to the cobra. “No,” the assistant pleaded, “not the cobra.” But the snake-keeper insisted, “I feel inspired.” As he lifted up that cobra all seemed to be well as the snake's large head moved around in the air, but then in an instant the man realized he was face to face with the cobra and in a split second the cobra struck him right between the eyes. There were just two small marks on the keeper's forehead, but he sat down in a chair and said, “I am a dead man.” The assistant ran for help, but there was nothing anyone could do. The cobra's deadly venom was already flowing through the man's body, already in his nervous system. He did not die instantly as in the movies, but sat there suddenly sober, recognizing his condition as one who was alive but who was for all practical purposes dead, utterly without hope and without a future.

That is your condition as a human being. You have been bitten by sin, you are poisoned, you are perishing. It makes no difference if you are a child, or an old person, if you grew up in church or if you think you are a good person. The truth is that the poison of sin is in your system, and sooner or later you are going to die. So there is a second question.

2. Do you want to live? Like Moses carrying the snake on the pole around the camp, I am lifting up Christ on the cross. Here he is, dying for you. Will you look and live?

You can say no. You can refuse the cure. You can say “No, I'd rather go with Dr. Kevorkian and die with dignity. I'm so proud I'd rather *die* than admit I need God.”

You can laugh at such a simple idea of salvation. “It's got to be harder than that. It doesn't make sense for God to give salvation away rather than judging the quality of our lives.” Look, if God judged the quality of our lives we all deserve to be separated from him forever. The question is not *why* God chose to save us this way. This is what he provided. It doesn't have to make any more sense to you than that bronze snake. The question is: Do you want to live?

You can say that you just don't believe it will work. You can't imagine that just looking at the cross, just trusting in what Jesus did there for salvation, can really make a difference in your life. But what have you got to lose? You're dying! Isn't it worth a try? What if it's true that this one thing is your only chance at life and you turn away?

You can say that you are too far gone, that the poison has worked in you too long and there is no hope for you. But it's not true! Whether your sin is like one little accidental prick from a tiny coral snake, or you have fifty pythons wrapping themselves around your arms and legs and squeezing the air out of your chest, you can look to the cross and live! There is no sin God cannot forgive. You are never so wicked or so religious that God cannot give you life.

Look at the cross and live!