

Look Up!

4 Lent B, 3/10/24

Well, folks, the snakes are back. What is it about the Bible and slithereens¹? One week they're cast as the devil himself and told to shut up and get lost. Two weeks later, they're back as a teaching tool, being raised in the desert, or lifted up in the wilderness, as a sign and a symbol of how we get saved. Now, which is it? And what do the snakes get out of it? I don't see anybody – Jesus, Moses, or the Lord himself – asking their permission for any of the things that happen to them or because of them.

As surprised as we are to see them, imagine how the people felt who met them on the road in today's first reading. That whole passage has this given in the NRSV by way of commentary: "Another complaint". It says something when even the professionals paid to deal with you get fed up with your issues, but there we have it. The formerly enslaved people of Israel who left Egypt in a mad rush way back in the book of Exodus are still on their Long March to somebody else's country, and through yet other peoples' country, and have gotten fed up – again.

Can you blame them? They were out in the wild on the way to God Knows Where and by means only God Knows How. No-one they met – no-one – was glad to see them. Plus, there was nothing to eat. Plus, there wasn't much to drink. Plus, there was nowhere to buy new sandals. They were not happy about these things, not one little bit. So they whined. They complained. Moses didn't contest their points, because how could he? Except he didn't even have time, because the Lord addressed the concerns of these hungry, thirsty refugees by sending them...snakes, fiery ones –

¹ The name is actually that of a new strategy game being developed – see <https://www.slithereens.com/> -- but I didn't know that when I wrote the word down. Yes, I subscribed to the game developers' newsletter.

cue the dragon – to improve their health, or at least their attitude. “Who among you, when your child asks for bread, give them a stone; or when they ask for fish, give them snakes?” Jesus asks somewhere in Matthew. In the Book of Numbers, though, that’s just what God does: gives miserable people something to make them more miserable, until they stop being miserable about it.

You do wonder sometimes, don’t you? I know I do.

But lo and behold – for such has the story come down to us – it works. Beatings continued and morale improved. Beatings continued until morale improved. The people, amid hisses and shrieking, repented and asked Moses, very nicely, if he could ask the Lord if maybe he could take the snakes away, please, we’re sorry, we didn’t mean it, we won’t whine or complain any more. We promise.

And the Lord did. No more snakes. (“We know,” they said. “Gone again. It’s ‘get thee behind’ once we stop being a teaching tool. It’s been like this since the Garden of Eden, and that wasn’t even our fault.” Except they hissed it, having lost the power of speech. The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.) A few verses later, though many miles down the road, the Lord will give the people water, so no worries, eh? God is merciful and full of compassion; blessed be the name of the Lord. No word on what happens to the slithereens.

What began as discipline, if not simply abuse, the Lord had Moses turn into a Lesson in Life for people who had nothing. He said, make a bronze (or copper) serpent, set it on a pole, and then anyone who’s bitten can just look up at that and not die. I know that may seem hard for those who get bit near the eyes, but...

Look up. Look up! Not in the dictionary but at the pole, at the serpent on the pole, at whatever the Lord told you to look up at so that you wouldn’t die, no matter what was biting you or gnawing for your bones. Look up!

Does that work for the snakes as well? Seeing one of their own dipped in molten copper and raised before them must've made quite an impression on their S-R brains. It is not said whether they looked up before they slithered away, but they probably did, if just to get a tongue-sniff, figure out how the people they were biting gained the strength to bite (as it were) back. One can only imagine how much they then wanted to be elsewhere. But it's the "Look up!" part that Jesus remembered and used in his message, as we heard from John's gospel this morning. "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" (John 3:14-15). That we should 'Look up' and see this is implied. To see is to be set free.

On wood. For all to see. For all to look upon in wonder and fright, wondering what does this mean? How will believing in this give us the life that does not die? How will this echo and reminder of chastisement and repentance from the darkest days of our people's wandering, save the world?

In Numbers' wilderness of (exquisitely) Zin, it's magic, or just because God Said So, which is simply magic in drag. The Lord said look at the metal snake if a real snake bites you, and you won't die. Why not? I don't know; just do it and you'll be fine. God's power is greater than we can imagine, and if God wants to work in ways we don't understand or maybe can't understand, who are we to gainsay him? But relying on magic is a fool's errand, except in the movies, and even then the 'magic' becomes a kind of technique, at least, a science you can apply even if the theory you do not understand. Many an engineer has lit upon a solution by such a means, and which such empirical faith. "I don't know why it works," they'll say about something that quite clearly works. "It just does."

As philosophers and theologians used to say, it was rumored, at the University of Chicago. "Sure, it works alright in practice. I just have no idea how we're ever going to make it work in theory."

Much of Christianity has believed, or half-believed, that God works in just this mysterious and magical way. We can't know how belief in his only Son gives us the life that does not end; we just have to accept that it does, and that this accepting-without-proof is proof to God that we are...worthy of it? That makes a kind of sense, biblically. The first people were told "Don't eat of that tree over there," and not really told why not, not in a way they understood. Perhaps that's why they were so easily beguiled by the...serpent, did you say? Yes, the serpent, not in the wilderness this time but in paradise itself – where, as yet, and as far as they knew, there was no flaw, or not that they knew. But there was a flaw, and the possibility of death, even in paradise; *et in arcadia ego*. Yet if the people had just done what they were told, no questions asked, no problems.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians goes further. (The three things we know about Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, btw., are that it: a) most likely wasn't written by Paul, b) likely wasn't a letter, and c) was likely not written to the people of Ephesus. But leave that by-the-by for now.) In Ephesians, it is by grace that we are saved, not even via the 'work' of belief, of faith, of the decision to say, "Aye". His act alone – God's, that is – being freely gracious unto us and kind, raising us up (there's that "Look up!" again) to sit within him in the heavenly places is what did it. It's what does it, and will, that generations yet to come might know that God is merciful and kind. Wallowing in our passions and desires we were. the writer says, disobedient, not doing what we were meant to, were made for – so God brought us back to where we would be able to do that, would be able to want to do that freely again. By his mysterious grace unmerited and unearned we became again not children of wrath or whining – some of the most serious passions of the flesh to worry about, mind you – but children of the work, the work he made us for, the lives he made us to live, under the light he lit for us to do it in, dispelling the darkness, and making slither away the evil, the wrathful, and the wrong.

All this talk of magic and mystery makes it easy to forget something. The writers of the Gospel of John, and the communities from which they came and for whom they wrote, did not think of all this as magic and mystery at all. They considered it all as true – as what had happened. Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and those who listened to him and lived as he told them stopped sinning. He came to save people from the power of death. He came to save them, that is, from anxiety about, and fear of life, and submission to their passions and desires, their fears and their hates. He reminded them that they did not have to live that way, were in fact born not to live that way. He told them and showed them that, if they believed him, and thought and acted as he said to, their lives got better. Other people saw this and decided to ignore it, or pretend it wasn't true, or that even if it were true, it didn't matter. They saw that the light shone, but chose to remain in darkness. They saw that there were things that were true that they had not expected and might not have wanted to be true, but chose to ignore them, or tell themselves a Big Lie, claiming that what was true, what everyone could see was true, was in fact not true. They chose in this to be, or remain, evil – for the hallmark and foundation of the province of evil, of the power of what Ephesians calls the “prince of the air,” is that it is founded on, depends on, and works to perpetuate lies.²

If we imagine the evil among us as those who would convince us that the light is out when we can see for ourselves that it is not, or that it is purple-dark at noon when in fact the sky is bright blue and the sun white-gold within it, we can see what John is on about, and to a certain extent Ephesians. We should so imagine them, since as far as I can tell, every evil perpetuated within living memory was sent forth, as fiery serpents in the wilderness, on the basis of lies. Lies about Jews, lies about democracy, lies about the intentions of wealth, lies about race and inequality, lies about history,

² See 1 Enoch 6.3,7, as cited in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 347n. In 1 Enoch, it is rebellious / fallen angels that introduce things to humans they were not meant to know, including metallurgy and perfumery, functioning very much like this 'Prince of the air' cited in Ephesians 2:2.

lies about who was doing wrong to whom, lies about what it means to be a person, lies that lead to wars, lies that make wars go on and on, lies about elections being stolen when they were, in fact, not stolen – lies upon lies. Such lies always have forces in the darkness and shadows behind them, perpetuating them, insisting on them, gaslighting good people to believe in them *against the evidence of their own senses* and, cult-like, follow only those who perpetuate the lie. These are the tactics and techniques, the behaviors and expressions, of those who are evil.

The Nazis had a phrase, a word: *Lügenpresse*, the lying press, that they always (and only) used against newspapers and journalists who were printing truths that they, the Nazis, wanted to deny. The Soviets and their successors in Putin's Russia have similar, if not quite so catchy, terms for it. By supreme irony, the Soviets called their daily paper *Pravda*, or “truth,” though you could find no more truth in it than you'd find cream cheese on the moon. In our day, the equivalent term is ‘fake news’. The surest way to find news that isn't fake, I have found, is to look for what certain persons – rapists who've led insurrections and have been shown to have lied tens of thousands of times over – call ‘fake news’. Bring it into the light, and its accusers; the truth will out soon enough. I've yet to see something that proven liars have called ‘fake news’ that wasn't actually true. Like the serpents in the wilderness, those false charges bite, beguiling people as only lies can, keeping them in darkness, and making them aiders and abettors of evil.

It would be a misreading of the Gospel of John to say that it equates disbelief with evil. It does not. Instead, it shows that evil consists in belief in what should not or cannot be believed. Lies, for example, such as the lie that it is dark when in fact light shines. Believing that what you want to be is, for that reason, true – that also is evil. Not wanting to know the facts because, “I know what I believe” – yep: evil. To persist in ignorance or illusion, and to stop trying to know more than we do today. These, too, are evil. Likewise, it is evil to persist in a belief when you've been shown

that it is wrong. When we feel called to do that, tempted to do that, what do we do: We look up! See the brazen serpent lifted up in the wilderness, see the Son of Man lifted up in Jerusalem, and follow where love and compassion lead: to kindness, compassion, and truth. Grace gave us back the ability. Using it, however, is up to us. Use it well. *Amen.*