

**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

**Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B**

**March 10, 2024**

Numbers 21:4-9: Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

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Every family has traditions.

My wife and I have one…where we hide an Easter bunny for the other to find.

It has been found in a dresser drawer.

The bunny might show up in a suitcase…when you’re off on a trip.

What does it represent?

You are remembered. You are cared for, even from a distance. You are loved.

Sometimes it disappears for months at a time…or even years.

Then it makes its appearance again when you least expect it,

communicating its message of love and care.

We need more little bunnies in our lives.

You don’t need a stuffed animal to give a bunny away.

They are sometimes called warm fuzzies.

They take the forms of: A gentle, caring hug/ a word of affirmation and support/

a gentle touch/ an act of kindness.

Warm fuzzies make you feel good. They make you feel loved.

It’s like being surrounded by a soft, thick, luxurious bath robe.

It’s like sinking into your soft, cushy recliner.

Little bunnies. Warm fuzzies.

There are no bunnies named in the Bible. Not a single one.

Although we can assume that there was a pair on the ark.

But there are no Bible verses that refer to rabbits…

and warm fuzzies is not a biblical, theological term.

Instead, what we find in the Bible are snakes.

Wait a minute. What did you say? Snakes?

Talk about being the opposite of bunnies.

There are a few things I hate. Snakes are high on the list.

They touch some deep, primordial fear within me.

Snakes live in dark, secret places.

They surprise you when you are not looking.

They bite you when you are not paying attention.

I like bunnies, but I want to stay far away from snakes.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is teaching the Pharisee Nicodemus.

As he did, he used Old Testament images to convey theological truth.

I notice two in particular: wilderness and serpent.

He didn’t hold up a Christian t-shirt…or a 3:16 sign at a football game.

He held up wilderness and serpent.

Jesus and Nicodemus were not on the same theological page.

But both knew their history, and God’s hand revealed in nature.

As St. Paul told the church in Rome, *Ever since the creation of the world*

*His eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are,*

*Have been understood and seen through the things he has made* (Rom 1:20)*.*

Wilderness and serpent.

Let’s plumb those natural elements…

To see why Jesus chose them in particular to communicate holy truth.

The wilderness…is not where you want to live.

It is the geography from which you try to stay away.

Crops? Forget about it.

Grazing of animals? No.

Wilderness is not conducive to life.

In the Exodus, ancient Israel was in the wilderness…

As they made their way from the Red Sea to the Promised Land.

For like, overnight? No.

For like, 40 years.

In the wilderness, the people were hungry.

They cried out to God.

And God sent food from heaven for them—manna.

But that was a long time ago.

Now, the people were tired.

They had lost their spirit.

They had been eating this manna day after day.

They told God they were sick of it.

These people had the gall to say,

*“We had it better in Egypt when we were slaves.*

*At least, every once in a while, we had a good square meal of meat,*

*not this day-after-day manna.”*

Do you and I ever live in the wilderness?

The place where life is so very difficult.

The place where all you feel inside…is discouragement.

Not having what you need and want to live.

Boredom with the routines of life.

Unconvinced that God cares about you.

Unpersuaded that justice and truth will ever win the day.

Notice this. It’s to the wilderness that Yahweh sends ancient Israel.

Notice…it’s the wilderness where John the Baptist begins announcing that the kingdom of God has come near.

Notice…it’s to the wilderness that Jesus goes to be baptized.

Notice…that Jesus uses the wilderness to teach Nicodemus and you…

about salvation and eternal life and the love of God.

Jesus also uses the image of the serpent to teach us about these holy matters.

According to our Old Testament story from Numbers,

God sent snakes to bite the people, and some of the people died.

You think television is violent. This story from Numbers is shockingly violent.

In the story, the snakes sent by God bite the people into their senses.

Being brought close to death, they remember how much life is a gift.

They are shocked into recognizing how much they owe to God, and their leader Moses, who are doing everything they can to preserve the people.

They are poisoned into their senses.

They apologize to Moses, admitting that they are sorry sinners.

Please ask God to call back the snakes!

Then Moses intercedes before God.

But God will not call off the snakes.

God will not remove this evil from them.

Instead, God tells Moses to…

put a brass serpent on a pole, and make the people look at it.

So that, in the future, when they are bitten, when evil overtakes them,

they will look at the saving snake upon the pole and be preserved.

In looking up toward the heavens, instead of looking down upon the earth, they will be saved.

Let me tell you how I see it.

Moses makes a replica of the very evil that people fear.

He takes the source of their anxiety, pulls it from beneath their feet,

puts it up on a pole and makes them look at it.

Somehow, by God’s hand, they are able to see…

that the terrible death has become the snake of awesome life.

Somehow, in the mystery of the moment, evil and threat are transformed.

The snakes that appear because of peoples’ sin

are the means for leading people out of sin.

The snakes that are the means of death…become the way of life.

Let me tell you how I see it:

We try to make God into a more gentle and pleasing image, like an Easter bunny.

Our savior is the one who always brings us good things,

who gives us our heart’s desire, who makes life easier for us.

Then one comes to us in threatening appearance,

with biting words, words that cut to the quick, venomous and prophetic words,

which makes life considerably more difficult for us,

and surprises us with the truth about ourselves that we don’t want to hear.

And sometimes with him, it feels like…

both something is dying, in order that something might be reborn.

Sometimes on Sundays in our encounters with him in Holy Word,

it hurts a bit, before we can be healed.

For 40 days in Lent, we talk of sin, before there can be salvation.

It’s like, we have to have weeks of Lent, before we can have weeks of Easter.

It is a strange story.

Here is a deep, dark powerful symbol of salvation.

Somehow, in the hands of God, evil and good, threat and promise, life and death are all put together.

We can’t explain it. But we intuitively know that we are looking at a deep truth.

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus used that ancient symbol of a brass serpent on a pole as a symbol for himself.

In lifting him up from earth toward heaven, he becomes the means of salvation.

And even those who had killed him, standing at the foot of the pole, the cross, were able to look up and say, “Truly this is the Son of God.”

*Nathan Sager currently serves as Pastor of Spirit of God Lutheran Church in Duluth and Instructor at Lake Superior College.  He has served as a parish pastor for 39 years, and 24 years as a college instructor.  His education includes: B.A. from Gustavus Adolphus College, M.Div. from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and a Doctor of Ministry in preaching from Luther Seminary. He lives in Duluth with his wife Rayna and son Isaac and enjoys walks, curling, Harbortown Rotary, home improvement projects, music, art, reading, antiques, and community service.*

