

**Snakes on the Plain (Look Into the Light)**, a sermon in response to Numbers 21:4-9, Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22; and John 3:14-21 by Rev Scot McCachren for Hilltop Church, March 10, 2024 (B Lent 4).

“Snakes... Why did it have to be snakes?” ... In the classic movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, world-renowned adventure-archeologist Indiana Jones has bravely faced any number of dangers in his quest to track down the Biblical Ark of the Covenant before it can fall into the hands of Adolf Hitler, who wants to use its power as a weapon for world domination. Dr Jones has survived the jungles of South America, a giant rolling boulder trap, a band of native warriors, hired mercenaries.... You name it – Dr. Jones is up to the task with his trusty hat and whip... That is, until he faces a pit of snakes. That’s the only time he really takes pause... rolls back... and says, “Snakes... Why did it have to be snakes?” +++ Of course, he works up his courage and faces the danger. But..., for a moment there..., you think he might just pack up and go home. +++ +++ And then... in the film “Snakes on a Plane,” the ultimate nightmare comes true: a passenger plane is infested with aggressive, poisonous snakes of every kind, shape, and size – dropping out of luggage racks, slithering around your feet... creeping up the aisles. Fortunately, Samuel L Jackson is also on the plane – and he declares war on the snakes, famously shouting, “I’ve had it with these... ..” +++ ... well – I can’t finish that quote – especially not in this setting... Suffice to say, he’s feeling angry about the snakes. +++ And can you blame him? I mean, is there anything scarier than a sudden invasion of snakes? Not just scary – but *dangerous*. Lots of snakes can kill with a single bite – and they’re *really creepy*! +++ >> So, maybe, just maybe... if you’re really trying to get someone to wake up and pay attention... if you’ve tried everything else you can think of... it’s time to try snakes.

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I think that’s why our Old Testament reading this week never fails to get our attention. It’s just so surprising, isn’t it? Nothing that’s happened so far in the Bible has prepared us for the sudden appearance of **Snakes on the Plain**, sent by God, slithering around everywhere, biting and killing Israelites right and left. +++ It begs the question: “Why?” +++ What does it mean? +++ And... can any good news come from such a narrative? +++ ... +++ Before we try to answer that, though, let’s back up a bit to get some perspective... see if we can get a handle on what God is doing... and whether or not Israel finally wakes up and pays attention.

After suffering through generations of slavery in Egypt, Israel had finally been delivered into freedom by God. In the process, they had seen God do amazing things through Moses: – arguing nose-to-nose with Pharaoh and winning – and all those plagues! After all that, you’d think they would really be ready to put their trust in the Lord and go wherever they are lead with faith and courage. +++ You’d think. +++ But it’s easy to get spoiled, isn’t it? It seems like the more God does for Israel, the more they expect... like everything should just be taken care of for them and nothing is good enough to satisfy them. Any discomfort or fear brings out the complaints. +++ \*\* Some examples: when they were penned down on the shores of the sea, instead of trusting God they got sarcastic with Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?... +++ BUT, ... instead of punishing their faithlessness, **God parted the waters..., gave them dry ground..., and saved them again...** +++ \*\* When they were running out of water, they complained against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place?” How did God react this time? By giving them the water they needed. +++ \*\* When they had no food, they complained again, this time against Moses and Aaron, “the Lord should have just killed us in Egypt instead of bringing us out here in the wilderness to starve – at least there we had food to eat.” And here again, instead of growing angry, the **Lord sent them manna from heaven...** +++ Time and again, God had come through for them – saved them – showed them that things had changed. Trust me – follow me... – be my people – **Free – No Strings attached** – and everything will be like new again. +++ But, time and again, they couldn’t be bothered to truly make that commitment. – They kept questioning and testing the Lord. – They kept complaining. “You know, at least back in the *good old days* – we had things we could rely on – like... well, like, ... slavery...” +++

That brings us to *today’s* reading. – Finally, God’s People actually suffer consequences for their faithlessness – and the Lord finally gets their attention – with snakes. In the past, they’ve spoken against Moses, and sometimes Aaron – but now **THEY GO TOO FAR**: “The people spoke against God and against Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.’” +++ Maybe even worse, the **“miserable food”** they’re complaining about is the manna that God has been

giving them every day to sustain them through the wilderness until they reach the Promised Land. +++ **Instead of showing thanks** to God, +++ instead of heeding repeated reminders that it's time to start trusting the Lord – time for each person to make a decision about putting their life in God's hands... – Instead of any of those faithful responses– they reject the very life-giving gifts God gives them every day.... Enough is enough. They're not learning to look toward the Lord to live. Something's got to ***give*** – something's got to **get their attention**. +++ **That's when, suddenly, they find themselves infested with poisonous serpents** – biting them – and killing them. +++ **Finally, the people see the error of their ways:** – The Lord had always been there for them – always ready to save them. THEY had been the problem all along – not Moses – not God. +++ And once again – even now, amid these deadly serpents that they brought upon themselves – the Lord reaches out to save them. +++ **But this time, there's a difference.** >> So far, the Israelites have experienced everything **collectively**. They are **all** saved from slavery. They **all** sin and complain. They are **all** fed and given water. But this time, **each** of God's People **finally** must make a choice – a **personal** choice for her or himself. There's not one big miracle that saves them all in one fell swoop – like the Red Sea had been, like the water in the wilderness, or like the manna. This time, salvation will be different. **Each person** has to make their own choice: either turn back to God, – look to the sign of the Lord, – and **accept** the gift of life being that's being offered to them... – **or**, they could look away and reject it. **Either would be a choice** for each person to make for themselves, – their **own... personal...** choice. +++ The Lord has Moses make the bronze image of a poisonous serpent and put it on the end of a pole – and place the pole in the ground so it is visible to everyone. +++ And as everyone is bitten, – everyone condemned to die – who **deserves...** to die – because of their sin – can be saved. All they have to do is have faith in the Lord, – to **believe the Lord will save them** – enough to lift their eyes and look at God's symbol – the serpent Moses had lifted up. It's a personal choice, to look and believe in the Lord – and be saved – *again*, as always, – by the grace and power and love of their merciful God.

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That's the very same choice offered by our very familiar Gospel reading, beginning at John 3:14: “And just 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. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that **everyone who believes in him** may not perish but may have eternal life...” +++ **[PAUSE]** +++ +++ In this passage, Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, a Pharisee who comes to visit Jesus. Now, **as** a Pharisee – Nicodemus is religious authority and teacher in his own right. He believes Jesus is a teacher from God, but as their conversation develops, he struggles to understand the things Jesus says, – things like “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above (or born again).” +++ – But Nicodemus takes Jesus literally: “How can ***anyone*** be born ***after*** having grown old?” Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?” +++ So Jesus tries again: ...“The **wind** blows where **it** chooses, and you **hear** the **sound** of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” But, like all the other Religious Leaders, Nicodemus isn't ready to understand the divine nature of God's Spirit and love. Jesus blows his mind. Nicodemus can only respond in confused wonder: ... “How can these things be?” +++ It's like – ever since Jesus arrived on the scene – nothing **makes sense** anymore. Nicodemus sees that God is doing something new. – He knows it's time to wake up and pay attention. And he's trying to. Give Nicodemus credit – **he's trying**. But, **to his way of thinking, what Jesus is saying just doesn't compute**. He can't get his mind off the things of **this** world. – So, he tries to put everything Jesus says into terms he can *understand*,... into rules and routines..., like temple rituals, ... like Jewish tradition, ... like a top-down power structure, ... and enforcing the law. +++ He can't understand that all those things are **irrelevant** to salvation! – Salvation – eternal life – is a **gift from God**. +++ **Jesus offers Nicodemus a new way of looking at things, encapsulating the entire Gospel for him at verse 16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life...” Like Israel, beset by Snakes on the Plain, desperately crying out to the Lord, the Son of Man gives each us our own personal opportunity to turn and look at HIM out of the terrifying wilderness of life. – Each of us – Nicodemus, ... you ... me ...; we each have a chance to look to the Lord and be saved, no matter who we are – no matter what we've done – no matter how much we might deserve punishment.** +++ “So that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

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When I think about our own lives now – in this nation – this world – I can't help but realize how much we're like Nicodemus, **and** like the Israelites complaining in the wilderness – unable to understand the gospel message

because we try to bring it down into worldly terms instead of letting it lift us up to the eternal, – all the while, complaining and ignoring the blessings all around us. We often talk about the divisiveness in our society – how we can't have a dialogue without it turning into name calling and broken relationships. +++ We think and talk in short, shallow, sound bites... losing nuance, losing perspective, losing empathy. And, a lot of times, we like it that way – it's easier to just complain without looking for the answer. Now, education itself is held in contempt – as though a deeper understanding will, somehow, lead us astray. +++ We want what we want – right now. +++ I think this has all become more pronounced since the Covid pandemic. We're impatient with one another. We're more inclined to stay at home, isolated; and less likely to get involved in organizations like church, where deeper relationships develop. +++ I've also noticed more insistence on “getting what's due to us,” ensuring our own personal rights – even our own freedom (ironically called our religious freedom) to judge and ostracize our fellow citizens, perhaps forgetting that our nation was built on the backs of people who made willing sacrifices for the sake of others. +++ Like the Israelites before us – have we forgotten the times when our own Red Seas of isolation and danger have parted to give us dry ground to follow out of despair? Do we remember the manna and the water in the wilderness freely given so we might thrive? +++ +++ When we complain – when we refuse to accommodate others – when we insist on demonizing anyone who disagrees with us: are we looking up – seeking out the shining Bronze Serpent set before our eyes to save us; or... are we averting our eyes? – Are we looking to the cross? Or do we keep our eyes to the ground – preferring to do battle with the serpents than to trust God? ++++++ PAUSE ++++++

I think when Nicodemus met Jesus, he began wondering similar things – about himself – about his time – and his people. That's why Jesus reminds Nicodemus of the serpents in the wilderness, so many generations before. As a Pharisee, he surely knows the story. And, if anyone ever deserved punishment, it was those Israelites in the wilderness who spoke against God and rejected the gift of holy manna... Just as the Lord gave them a chance to turn their hearts back to God in faith – a chance to Look Into the Light of God and Live, as the poison of their sins threatened to destroy them – just as the Lord gave them that chance, so the people of THIS generation have that same chance. +++ “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,” Jesus explains, “so must the Son of Man be lifted up” (lifted up, this time, on a cross) ..., “so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God SO loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

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Our God is more interested in giving us water when we thirst than in judging us – despite our complaints. ... +++ Our God is more interested in sending us manna when we hunger than in condemning us – despite our stubborn sins. – ... +++ And when we falter – we can still look back and find our way. – +++ See the icon shining in the wilderness inviting us to look and be saved +++ Hear the voice of the Son of God – the voice of our Good Shepherd, calling us back into the fold. +++ +++ As much as we might deserve to be condemned – our God is a God of LOVE – “who did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

The GOOD NEWS is... With Christ, the light of God has come into the world. +++ But, we do love darkness, don't we? +++ We resist change. +++ It's more comfortable out here in the wilderness – complaining of hunger and thirst when the Word of God could sustain you forever. +++ +++ Jesus Christ invites you to come in from the wilderness. He offers an extravagant hospitality from which you will never hunger or thirst again. He lays the eternal Bread of Life before you – and pours out his Living Water. Christ invites you to LOOK – to live in his light and to LIVE. +++ +++ And then, as a disciple of Christ you are called, as John the Baptist was, to “testify to the light” – to share the love of Christ with the world, so all might be saved through him. Jesus told Nicodemus that the Son of Man must “be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” +++ As the Church, it falls on all of us to “lift up” the Son of Man like Moses lifted the Serpent of Bronze – for all to see – and in their seeing, to be saved. – It falls to us to bring the truth and the hope of his Gospel to this broken and suffering world that still hungers and thirsts for God – perhaps more than ever before. +++ In the words of the great hymn that follows my message, “Lift High the Cross, the love of Christ proclaim ‘till all the world adore His sacred name.”

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.