

Messiah Moravian Church
March 5, 2023
Second Sunday in Lent, Year A
Dane Perry
John 3: 1-17

SERMON:

SNAKES AND JOHN 3:16

First, I want to acknowledge the insights of minister Nadia Bolz-Weber about today's passage from John.

Now, let's talk about--snakes. Some of you are already squirming in your seats at the mere mention of snakes. That's OK because you are not alone in your discomfort. Of all the many things and situations that folks fear—such as heights, enclosed spaces, spiders, diseases, public speaking—polls show consistently that the fear of snakes ranks number one.

I don't mind snakes, harmless ones, that is. For about seven years I kept a pet albino kingsnake, which was a Valentine Day's gift from my family—go figure. Slim Jim was fascinating to watch but had the annoying habit of escaping from its enclosure into the house. We would usually find it under a bookcase or curled up in some warm spot. Unfortunately, after its last escape, we never found it. Slim Jim went free range.

For eons humans have had a love-hate relationship with snakes. Some cultures adored and worshipped them, and others abhorred them as the very epitome of evil. From ancient times people observed and admired the ability of snakes to shed their old skin and to be instantly transformed and renewed. Thus they became symbols of rebirth, personal change, immortality and healing.

Yet an encounter with a venomous snake was a daily reality for folks and a matter of life and death without modern antivenom. For civilizations without access to modern medicine and healthcare, snake cults represented hope and healing from diseases and infirmities they could not understand, treat or heal.

And that brings us to today's Gospel passage. Verse 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."* That verse refers to the Old Testament story found in Numbers 21:4-9, when Moses saved the Israelites who were dying from venomous snake bites in the desert by placing a bronze snake sculpture onto a pole. Looking up at the bronze snake and remembering God's sustaining presence and promises of deliverance healed anyone bitten by the snakes.

But there's more to the bronze serpent story. After the Israelites reached the Promised Land, Moses placed the bronze serpent in the Temple as a symbol of God's protection. It remained there for 700 years until Hezekiah became king. King Hezekiah "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" with the bronze serpent.

He realized that the Israelites no longer looked beyond the symbol of the bronze serpent to the God to whom the serpent pointed; instead, they bowed down to the snake itself. By idolizing their own notions about God worked, they worshipped the snake itself and failed to see God in their lives.

So Hezekiah cut down the sacred pole: "He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offering to it; it was called Nehushtan," which was a local serpent cult.

Unitarian minister Dr. Carl Gregg writes: "Ironically, the bronze serpent had originally been [created] to remind the Israelites ...to look to God for healing and salvation, to stop complaining about minor inconveniences like food quality and to be grateful for major events like freedom from oppression. In Hezekiah's day that same bronze serpent had become an end unto itself."

The inherent danger of religious symbols is that people place their faith and belief in the symbol itself rather than the meaning behind the symbol. For many people that has happened with John 3:16, one of the most misused, misunderstood verses in the Bible, "the gospel in a nutshell," as Martin Luther famously wrote.

Taken literally it suggests that those who do not believe in this Son will perish. It is difficult to overestimate the harm and abuse that has resulted from the literal interpretation of this verse, such as the bloody Christian Crusades against Muslims, the Holocaust targeting Jews, Christian missionary work conducted among indigenous peoples that eradicated native culture and beliefs.

As seminary professor Karoline Lewis writes: "Motivations for John 3:16 being one's favorite Bible verse might be somewhat questionable. Does it hang on a wall [or] appear on a plaque... because people really believe *God loves the world*? Or because they appreciate frequent reminders that they are saved while others are not? Is John 3:16 in peril of losing its voice of promise because, rather than being a claim of assurance, it's used as an injunction for judgment? Because rather than being a statement about *God's love for the world*, it's a threat to those unwilling to accept *God's love*. Because rather than heard as an invitation to participate in spreading *God's love*, it's a summons to exclude those we think *God does not love*."

So when did a verse about the extravagant and self-giving love of *God* become about exclusion and violence? For some people the good news is that there is an in-group and an out-group; for others, the good news is that there is no longer an out-group. For some, the love of *God* in *Christ* for them is not enough. Therefore they must, and often the church feels it must, add to the gospel. And through the ages what the church adds every time is an exclusion clause: for *God* so loved us, but not them.

Do people really need to believe that a world-redeeming, life-giving, people-loving *God* is not good enough news unless it excludes someone else? And what's the best way to exclude someone else from *God's* extravagant love? Make it about belief. When it becomes about belief, then people want to determine what is exactly the right *kind* of belief, the right *style* of belief and the right *amount* of belief, and, as a result, very soon an in-group and an out-group arise. The in-group offers its gift of pure belief or doctrine or morality to *God* in exchange for love. Consequently, they think they deserve to be the in-group. Those who do not offer these things clearly deserve to be the out-group because they had their chance, and they blew it.

Christian faith is not an if-then proposition: if you believe, then you will be saved. It is a because-therefore proposition: because *God* loved the whole world, therefore *God* came to us in *Christ* so that there would no longer be any confusion about the inclusiveness of that love. Because *God* loves the world, therefore we are free to do the same. Belief is not what we offer *God* in exchange for *God's* love.

God has claimed us and gathered us into *God's* redemptive love for the whole world. There is nothing for us to add: no amount of belief, no perfect doctrine, no good works--nothing. *Because God loves the world, because God became human, ate*

with sinners and bureaucrats and died an innocent death on a cross for all, *therefore* no exclusion clause needs to be added to God's love; *therefore* we can trust that this is a God for and with **all** of us; *therefore* we can add nothing to that and nothing can be taken away from that.

For Martin Luther, John 3:16 was the gospel in a nutshell. The gospel should mean good news. But when the gospel in a nutshell no longer sounds like good news for **all** people, then it's not good news. Because God's mission is not just to love you and me, but rather the whole world.