

## **Believe and Live** (Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21)

I remember one time when the children were little and I opened the back door to take them out to play, only to find the patio full of huge snakes! They were only black snakes, but the sight of so many slithering snakes certainly took me aback—aback into the kitchen with the children.

Snakes have had this effect on us humans throughout history. They're so silent, so sneaky, and potentially so dangerous. Most ancient cultures had stories about snakes. There's the serpent-ancestor of the Aztecs; the "old god of nature" in parts of Africa (to this day); the serpent Ananta in some branches of Hinduism; and, of course, the snake in the Garden of Eden. The Jewish and Christian traditions have seen the snake as not only dangerous but also symbolic of evil—symbolic of evil within the world and evil within each one of us.

This is illustrated in our Old Testament lesson for today. God had delivered the Hebrews from their cruel slavery in Egypt. They were wandering in the wilderness—wandering and grumbling. Even though God had rescued them, had left the "high places" to be present with them, and was leading them toward the Promised Land, all they could do was grumble or complain.

As punishment for their evil grumbling against God, a plague of snakes came upon the camp. And these weren't like my harmless black snakes. These were poisonous, killer snakes! Thus, because of their lack of trusting God, their complaining, their rebellion against God, their sins, the Hebrews were dying. Nonetheless, God didn't leave the people to the fate they really deserved. Instead, God gave Moses a way to save the people. God told Moses to make a snake out of bronze, put it on a pole, and then lift it up so that the people could look upon it. Those who looked upon the bronze snake, believing that God would save them, would indeed be saved, would live.

Later, the bronze serpent was kept in the Tabernacle as a sacred object. But when, hundreds of years later, King Hezekiah discovered that the people were worshiping it, he destroyed it. As the rabbis explained, "It was not the serpent that gave life. So long as Moses lifted up the serpent, they believed on him who had commanded Moses to act thus...God..."<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, William, The Gospel of John, Volume 1

serpent wrapped around the pole continued to be seen as a symbol for healing, a symbol we're all very familiar with, since it's used by medical organizations to this day.

When Jesus was trying to explain who he was and what his purpose was to Nicodemus, Jesus used this snake story from the Old Testament. Today's passage from the Gospel According to John is the only place in the New Testament that mentions the bronze serpent. According to the Gospel Writer John, Jesus told Nicodemus that Moses put the snake on a pole and lifted it up so that the people could see it, believe in God's presence and power in the snake, and, believing, be saved from death. Similarly, Jesus said, he would be lifted up, so that everyone who looks to him will see God's presence and power in him and, believing, be saved from death.

And, in John's gospel, immediately after Jesus says this, comes the most well-known passage in the whole New Testament: "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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

Martin Luther called this passage "the gospel in miniature." Marcus Borg calls it "the Heart of Christianity." While, as we all know, preachers and theologians don't agree on a lot, they do seem to agree on the importance of this passage. And so what is it really saying to us?

First, the passage clearly tells us who Jesus is. He's the Son of God.

Second, the passage tells us why the Son of God came to earth in the form of a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. He came because, out of his love for the world, God wants to save the world.

Third, the passage explains how the Son of God saves. He saves when people look upon him lifted up and dying on the cross and believe that he is the Son of God. But this believing that is essential for salvation is more than we usually think it is. According to W. Hulitt Gloer, in John's gospel, believing

involves action.<sup>2</sup> In other words, those who are saved aren't the ones who just confess that Jesus is the Son of God. Those who are saved are the ones who live their lives as Jesus said we should—those who do what Jesus said his followers must do.

A pastor named Ed Young told of his call to the ministry. He said, "While I attended the University of Alabama, I got away from Bible study and away from the church. I had a friend name Walter Carroll, who was an atheist. He was a good guy, though. One Sunday afternoon he looked at me and said, 'Eddie, do you believe there's a God?' I said, 'Sure, Walter, I believe there is a God.' He said, 'You don't live like it.' I said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'You live just like I do. I'm an atheist. I don't believe there's a God, and I live like there's no God. We're buddies. You do everything I do. You say there is a God, and yet you don't live like there's a God.'" According to John's gospel, those who really believe in Jesus as the Son of God are clearly identifiable from non-believers.

C. H. Spurgeon claimed that 98 percent of the people he met—including the criminals he visited in England's prisons--told him that they believed the Bible to be true. But the vast majority had never made a personal, life-changing commitment to Jesus Christ. For them, "believe" was not an active verb.

Fourth, today's gospel passage tells us how judgment works. We pretty much judge ourselves—by the choices we make—doing what Jesus said we should do or doing what we want to do, which means rebelling against God, choosing the darkness over the light, choosing death over life--in this world and in the world to come.

The Apostle Paul spoke of us being dead in our sins. In other words, every time we rebel against God and his ways, a little more poison enters our bodies and begins killing us spiritually, often even physically. Sin kills innocence. It kills our ideals, our hopes, our aspirations, our wills, our lives.

Oscar Wilde had a brilliant mind, won all sorts of writing awards, even was a kind person. But, well, listen to his own words. "The gods had given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and

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<sup>2</sup> Gloer, W. Hulitt, "Homiletical Perspective," John 3:14-21, Feasting On the Word

sensual ease...Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in search for new sensation...I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me...I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber, one has some day to cry aloud from the house-top...I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace."<sup>3</sup>

Our sins are like deadly snakes. Every time we don't trust God with our lives, like the ancient Hebrews, we're murmuring against him, and we're smitten by evil, so that poison enters our lives. But out of his great love for us, God has sent us a cure that will save us.

The cure comes when we look upon Jesus and believe--believe that Jesus is the Son of God and believe that God is therefore as Jesus said he is: loving; caring for us; wanting to forgive us; wanting to welcome us back home when we stray from him; wanting to save us from the death of our sinfulness; wanting to offer us life in this world and beyond.

Thanks be to our loving God for providing the cure, for offering us salvation, for making it possible through Jesus for us to believe and live. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; March 22, 2009

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<sup>3</sup> Barclay, William, The Letter to the Galatians and Ephesians