

## THE SNAKE THAT BRINGS LIFE

So, who here likes snakes?  
Not many, I would guess.

There are a lot of people who would say that snakes are not exactly their favourite creatures.  
They're right up there with spiders in the popularity stakes.  
Even that mighty hero – the brave and intrepid Indiana Jones, has a big phobia of snakes.

And of course in the famous Genesis story of creation, that tale about a talking snake doesn't exactly endear us to the species.

There's even a movie called *Snakes on a Plane* which I haven't seen but I guess it's one of these movies that you don't really have to see to get the idea of what it's all about.

Today we are going to move from *Snakes on a Plane* all the way to *Snakes on the Plain!*

Because in our reading from the Book of Numbers the people of Israel were on a coastal plain, having had to go the long way round the territory of Edom on their slow search for a place to settle.

This is all taking place after their liberation from slavery in Egypt.  
They are on the move under the leadership of Moses – looking for the 'promised land', but despite their freedom, the journey is starting to seem endless, and the euphoria at being away from the ordeal that was Egypt, is being replaced by moaning at their new predicament.

These gripes appear in the previous chapter (Numbers 20).  
They complained because they had no water.  
They complained because of the "evil" they had been exposed to on the trip.  
There was no place to grow crops.  
And, they complained about the lack of food.  
They were impatient, they were uncomfortable – and so they grieved.

Of course their journey also included other difficult obstacles.  
They were refused the right of way through some territories and had to take long de-tours.  
Aaron, (Moses' older brother and right hand man), had just died.  
And before they could grieve properly for him, they were caught up in fighting with the Canaanites.

Then they came to an area where there seemed to be an inordinate amount of dangerous and deadly snakes. To them it was like a plague.  
And if you look carefully at the text, poor God gets the blame for "sending" the snakes.

Just like ancient people did in those days, they imagined that God had deliberately sent the snakes – just like they believed that God decided every morning what the weather was going to be like.

But one thing was certain.  
And it was that people started going down with snakebites.  
They were getting ill, and some were dying.

So Moses turns to God for help.  
And God replies by telling him what to do.  
He has to get someone to make a metal snake and weld it onto a pole.  
The snake on the pole then can be held aloft.  
Anyone who has been bitten needed to look up to this snake on a pole and then they would be cured.  
And as the Israelites focussed on the pole they found healing.

Instead of looking down, they looked up. They looked past their griping and focused on the bigger picture. Their suffering ended because they had directed their thoughts toward God and to what God had promised to do.

It was a classic change of focus.

God didn't send the snakes, but God did send help to the people of Israel.  
By changing their focus – by looking up instead of down, by concentrating on the snake on the pole they see beyond a piece of metal, to the greater reality of God who does the healing.

I guess there are a couple of lessons from this ancient story.

Firstly, instead of running away from our fears, healing so often occurs by facing up to them squarely, then focussing beyond them to a greater reality.  
A change of focus can be very liberating, especially when we focus on the bigger picture.

Secondly, it is a reminder as to how God works in our world.  
God doesn't take away the sources of trouble.  
God doesn't eliminate pain from our lives, but God helps us heal and get through the darkness to the light.  
Whatever we may face, God is with us to help us on our journey.

This old story was used by Jesus when talking with Nicodemus, in John 3.

*"As Moses lifted the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its saviour."*

(John 3:14-15, 17)

What does Jesus mean about being 'lifted up?'

Well it's true that we can use the expression to give someone honour, and there are millions of people who would lift Jesus up in that way, but before we get to that, there is a literal 'lifting up'.

When Jesus was crucified he too was lifted up as if on a pole – and by looking at and focussing on that symbol of death, we find hope and healing and life. The very thing that seemed to represent death becomes a sign of life and hope.

Just as the snake, the symbol of death, becomes a sign of healing and hope, the cross becomes another such sign – and it's a sign with meaning not for one particular group of people wandering in the wilderness – but for the whole of humankind – and that must include you and me.

From the least promising image comes hope for us all.  
 God is with us to help us.  
 God's love will never stop.  
 God's love will always persist.

Even as they try to destroy him – even as they drive the nails into his wrists and feet – Jesus asks forgiveness for those who hate him.  
 Even when we sink to our worst, we can't stop God's love.

Will Willimon, Methodist Bishop of North Alabama and a well-known writer and preacher in America tells about a parishioner with whom he was talking recently.

They were having coffee and he asked her, *"How have you been. How are things going?"*

*"Well not so good,"* she said. *"Our son's been putting us through hell."*

*"I'm so sorry,"* said Willimon. *"How old is your son?"*

*"He's eighteen and ... we have not known where he was for the last six months. We basically changed the locks on the front door. I pray for him every night, but we didn't know where he was, and last week, during dinner, suddenly somebody is pounding on the door. We open the door and there he is! And he starts this string of profanity.*

*I said, we're eating, come on in, sit down and eat with us – and he refuses to sit down at the table and he storms back into his old room, he slams the door shut, and I can hear the door lock.*

*And my husband sat there and he got up, poured himself a drink, went out, turned on the TV. That's kind of how he handles it.*

*And I put my napkin down and got up and went down the hall. I went out to the garage, and I looked at my husband's tools and I got this big hammer, this large hammer. I walked back from the garage back in the hall, stood in front of my son's door. I asked him, **"Open the door."** And this string of abuse and swearing pours out.*

*So I took that hammer and I leaned back and hit it with one good hit. I knocked the whole door knob, the lock, everything right off the door. Just split the door in two!*

*And I barged through the door. And my son looked terrified. And I caught him right up under his chin like this and I slammed him up against the headboard of the bed and I said, “**I went into labour because of you. And by God, I am not giving you up.**” \**

Now there's a mother with persistent love.

Let me tell you something.

In the end, that's the way God is.

That's the way God's fierce, relentless love is. Only God doesn't beat down doors with a hammer to get to us.

God's way with us is perhaps less violent, (and it's easier on the furniture bills!) – but God's relentless love won't give up on **us** either.

For the Hebrew people on the coastal plain, God provided an antidote for the snakebites...not removing the pain from them, but giving them a way to live beyond the pain.

And later, this same God would submit to pain and torment and even death by crucifixion, so that we might know beyond doubt the extent of a love that gives and gives and gives.

When we look to the cross and see what it means, we know that this symbol of death actually brings life and hope and love that can never be defeated.

Numbers 21:4-9

John 3: 14-21

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\* (The William Willimon story is cited by Jon Walton's Sermon: "The Blessedness of Brokenness" April 13 2008)