

Sermon: The Good Snake

3/14/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

In a small church tucked away in the hills of Tennessee, Pastor Andrew Hamblin was leading worship in front of a large mural of Noah and the Ark. For nearly an hour, Hamblin and his small congregation worshiped amidst a chaotic jumble of tambourines, electric guitar, and humming. A miracle was in the air. They could feel it. As the music intensified and the cries grew louder, Hamblin set down his guitar and walked toward a box on the floor. Some services the box went untouched. That Sunday, God was calling on him to place his trust in God. So he opened up the box, stuck his hand in, and pulled out a live rattlesnake. Snake Salvation, a show that aired on National Geographic a few years ago, went on to show Hamblin dancing around in front of the congregation, snake in hand. As I watched, my mind immediately went to Indiana Jones. “Snakes,” Jones complains while face-to-face with an Egyptian cobra, “Why’d it have to be snakes?” A question I’ve asked myself many times this past week.

Our Gospel lesson for today begins with Jesus speaking to a man named Nicodemus. As a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus was educated, successful, and well-known. It was also his business to know what was going on in Jerusalem, especially at the Temple, and as we heard last week, quite the stir had recently occurred there. Not only had Jesus driven out the animals and overturned the moneychangers’ tables, he’d been overheard calling the Temple his Father’s house. “What gives Jesus the right to say and do these things,” we can hear Nicodemus thinking to himself. Well, over the next few days, word began to spread that Jesus was performing signs that only someone sent by God could do, like healing the blind and curing the lame. Nicodemus wanted to know what it all meant, to find out if the rumors that Jesus is the

long-awaited Messiah were true. So he went to Jesus under the veil of darkness, so that he could speak with Jesus in secret, away from the watchful eyes of his fellow Pharisees and Sanhedrin members.

Nicodemus wanted to understand. After being told that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,” he asked Jesus how a person can be born again after having grown old. It was a good question. You see, He wanted to know what Jesus was trying to teach him. But no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t wrap his mind around it. “You’re a teacher of Israel,” Jesus responded, “and yet you do not understand these things? If you can’t understand what it means to be born again on earth, how can you ever expect to understand who I am and why I have been sent, that I’ve been sent so that you might be born again in heaven? You know the Scriptures. You remember the story of when 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.” Of all the stories that Jesus could have picked, why this one? Or to put it a different way, “Snakes. Why’d it have to be snakes?”

As we heard in our Old Testament lesson for today, the story to which Jesus was referring was not a happy one. After years spent wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites had grown tired of eating manna every day, searching desperately for water, sleeping in tents, and going to war with nearby kingdoms. God had promised them a land flowing with milk and honey, a place that they could finally call their own, a home. But where was their long-awaited Promised Land? And what hope should they have that they would ever get there? Amidst their struggles and doubts, the Israelites began to complain, much like I’m guessing we would, with some even wondering if staying slaves in Egypt would have been better. That’s when the snakes arrived. According to Scripture, the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people, causing many

to get bitten and a great number to die. Only then did the Israelites go to Moses, seeking forgiveness for their unfaithfulness, asking him to pray on their behalf. So Moses prayed for the people, and in response the Lord told to “Make a poisonous serpent out of bronze and set it on a pole, so that everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” That day, Moses did as the Lord commanded, and in the process saved many lives.

Today, such a command—not simply the sending of the snakes but also the lifting up of the snake on the pole—seems like an odd way for God to show love and mercy, to grant healing to God’s people by having them lift up an image of pain and death, of their pain and death. But in those days, people recognized the irony in snakes. For you see, snakes were not just an enemy, but a symbol of protection. That’s why pharaohs often wore elaborate headpieces displaying a hooded cobra, so that the cobra could spit venom at any enemy who might try to hurt them. It’s also why the symbol of the American Medical Association is two serpents intertwined around a short staff, otherwise known as the *caduceus*. Because when you receive medical care, sometimes you have to be hurt so that you can be healed. You have to go through chemo to be treated for cancer, have surgery to reset a broken bone, and get a shot to be vaccinated against a deadly disease, like the coronavirus. You have to, in other words, look towards an image of pain and death to receive new life.

Which brings us back to the Gospel of John, and to perhaps the most famous verse in all of Scripture. “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.” John 3:16, a verse we see printed on mugs and bumper stickers, held up on street corners and at sporting events, and even stitched onto face masks. A verse we lift up as a testament to God’s love, that through Jesus Christ we have been offered the gift of eternal life. We lift up this verse, rather than the one just before, not

simply because we'd rather not talk about snakes, but because Jesus talking about snakes also reminds us that accepting this gift, the gift of eternal life, comes at a cost.

For Jesus, the cost was that he must be lifted up. In order to save us, he needed to die on the cross. Like the bronze serpent, he had to be raised up where everyone could see him. Where everyone could look up to him, give thanks, and be healed. The Jesus that hung atop the cross was not pretty. There were nails in his hands and feet, blood dripping down from the cut in his side, and anguish on his face. Such honesty is one of the reasons why I own several crucifixes. Because we miss something when all we see is the empty cross, when we skip right over what Jesus experienced on Good Friday to his resurrection on Easter morning. We miss that only after experiencing such pain and death could Jesus be raised again. That Jesus had to be hurt in order to be healed, to be given new life, and to offer us new life in the process.

This new life, our being born again, truly is a gift from God. It is a gift which we cannot earn, a gift which God desires to freely give us. But that does not mean it is a gift which we can accept without personal cost. In the Gospel of John, Bishop Will Willimon notes, Jesus is referred to “not only as the good shepherd, but also as the good snake.” Like a snake, Jesus comes in among us, surprising us, “slithering in to our illusions of stability and safety.” Upon seeing the threat, the changes that God is calling on us to make, we pick up an ax and seek to beat him to death, much like happened to Jesus so long ago. That is when Jesus opens his mouth and speaks “words that cut us like a sword, venomous, prophetic words.”¹ If we want to be born again, if we want to be healed, we must take these painful words to heart. We must acknowledge that we have sinned, that we are broken and in need of healing, and that God alone can give us the healing we so desperately need. When we do this, Jesus’ poisonous, prophet words suddenly

¹ William Willimon, “Saved by the Snake,” *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Jan. 2006): 54.

transform. What was venom, that thing that hurt us, has now become anti-venom, the source of our healing, has now become the means of our salvation.

We're now deep into the season of Lent, that 40-day journey into the desert of our sin and the barrenness of our souls. How many of us, right now, are looking atop the pole to Jesus for healing? How many of us are refusing to look up, not because we haven't been bitten, but because the cost of being healed seems too great? And how many of us are trying to convince ourselves that the bite we felt never happened and that healing is not needed? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him," everyone who looks up to the good snake and accepts the cost of healing, "may not perish but may have eternal life." May each of us take these venomous, prophetic words to heart, and by doing so, may each of us be healed, may each of us be born again, both in this life and in the next. Amen.