

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**  
**Sunday, March 8, 2020**  
**Rev. Mark McLennan**

**Second Sunday in Lent**

**“A SERPENTINE STORY”**

Even in a time when many people don't know much about the Bible, it's a verse a lot of us know by heart. We don't even have to recite it; just the reference will do: "**John 3:16.**" The evangelically-minded hold up the reference on painted signs at football games. It suggests the heart of the Christian message, "*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.*" The short form: "*God so loved the world.*" That pretty much says it all, doesn't it? **It's the good news in a nutshell.**

Today, I'd like to invite you to go **deeper** into this familiar passage. To do that, I'd like to ask you to follow me on a journey into the distant past.

**LET'S TALK ABOUT SNAKES:** Start in the Book of **Numbers**:

The people are in the Sinai desert, half-heartedly following Moses on the circuitous trek toward a land that God has promised these former slaves. They are following half-heartedly because after all this time they have begun to doubt their leaders and even wonder if there is such a land at all.

Moses' rag-tag band of pilgrims have begun to "**murmur**"--that is, they are whining, complaining, bellyaching, over

- the hard life of the desert,
- the strange, God-given diet of manna and quail,
- and the uncertainty of their serpentine route.

**Serpentine** in more ways than one! For here, in the ninth chapter of Numbers, somewhere out in this seemingly God-forsaken desert, there is a plague of poisonous snakes. For the Hebrews, these snakes were many, and they were poisonous. People began to die. They asked that Moses intercede for them.

Moses then does intercede with God. In response, God tells Moses to fashion a **serpent** of bronze, put it on a pole, telling him that if any of the people are bitten by a poisonous snake, they should gaze at the bronze **serpent** and be healed. Interesting, isn't it? Look at a snake and be healed of snakebite.

So, going back to our story, it worked. Those who had been bitten gazed at the bronze serpent that Moses had made, and they were healed. **It was a miracle.** End of story? Maybe not.

## Second Kings, the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter.

Five hundred years have gone - Now the people have been settled in for some time in the Promised Land, where they had decided they needed to have kings like other nations. Many of those kings were disappointing and corrupt, but one king came along who was different. His name was **Hezekiah**, and he cleaned things up in the land. In fact, we are given a list of the things Hezekiah did: "*He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole.*" What he did was destroy the pagan worship places, which had cropped up around the land. And then this: "*He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan.*"

Do you see what had happened?

Five hundred years after Moses had made the bronze serpent as a means of healing, they still had it, and **it had become an idol**. That is, what had been a means to an end had become an end in itself!

The people worshiped the **serpent** instead of the **God** to whom it was to point. In any case, I wonder what the people's reaction was when King Hezekiah smashed that five-hundred-year-old bronze serpent. After all, it was made by Moses himself, a precious antique, a part of the nation's history.

Some old things are **precious**, - and some are just **old**.

Sometimes we Christians begin to worship what is old but no longer precious.

The Rev. Dr. Blair Monie

We have our traditions, you and I. We chafe against change.

I have a friend who asks, "*How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?*" "**Change???**"

Funny that we should be this way. After all, in my Presbyterian tradition, we have a motto.  
"*Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda.*"  
"Always Reformed, Always Being Reformed."

That means that we're supposed to **believe in change**--that some things that were good and helpful in their time are no longer good or helpful. It's like that T-shirt I once saw. On the front it said, "*Change is Good.*" On the back was written, "*You First.*"

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These two Old Testament passages about the bronze serpent illustrate a necessary point. What had been helpful and healing in one era had become an idol in another. I can't help but wonder:

how many things in the life of our churches used to be helpful and healing but have outlived their usefulness? How many old **traditions** have we turned into **idols**?

Someone has said, "Tradition is the living faith of dead people. Traditionalism is the dead faith of living people." How many things have we turned into idols, in the name of traditionalism?

There is much discussion these days about the church's failure to attract and engage young adults. The religion polls show that the most rapid growth is among the "**nones**" that is, those who answer the question of religious affiliation as "none." We can't help but wonder if those who visit our churches find us gathered around prized bronze **serpents** that we should have smashed long ago.

After four decades in ministry, I must confess that I'm very fond of many such **serpents**, but people like me must challenge ourselves to ask which among them are no longer helpful or healing.

What means to an end have I turned into ends in themselves? I must remember that motto of ours: *Always Reformed, Always Being Reformed*. Well, this is one word that challenges me, and I wonder if it challenges you.

Good King Hezekiah smashed the bronze serpent, and in so doing, he proved to be an example of the spirit of **reform**. So, are we done with our **serpentine** plot? Have we seen the last of the bronze **serpent**? Not quite.

Let's move ahead to **John, Chapter 3** to find Jesus, the Messiah, visiting by candlelight with a man named Nicodemus, a respected member of the Sanhedrin, the religious leaders of Jerusalem. The purpose of this clandestine meeting was to ask serious questions of Jesus, I suspect that Nicodemus was a genuine seeker who had urgent and searching questions.

So now we hear Nicodemus, his voice in whispered tones: "*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.*" With these words of Nicodemus, a door is opened and Jesus steps through. "*You must be born from above,*" Jesus says; but Nicodemus misunderstands. Because the Hebrew can be taken either way, Nicodemus thinks Jesus has said, "*You must be born again.*" What, he asks, *you mean I have to go back into my mother's womb and be born all over again?* No, says Jesus, *you need to be born on two levels—water and spirit. You must be born from above!*

The Rev. Dr. Blair Monie

How interesting, that in all our talk about being "*born again Christians*," we have joined Nicodemus in his mistranslation! I believe what Jesus really said was, "*You must be born from above.*" You see, he was trying to lift the eyes of this religious leader to take in higher things, so that he might begin to see his life from a spiritual perspective. *You must be born from above!* Jesus tells Nicodemus that he "*must be born of water and spirit.*" Lift up your eyes, Nicodemus! "*If I have told*

*you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"*  
Lift up your eyes, Nicodemus! There's more to life than you know!

So here it comes. You know **John 3:16**, "*God so loved the world.*"

Do you know **John 3:15**, the one that comes just before it?

Here it comes. "*No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man (Jesus). 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 will have eternal life.*"

Here it is! The bronze **serpent** has come back in the New Testament, in the gospel! That old bronze **serpent** made by Moses and smashed by King Hezekiah has come back at the end of this serpentine story. Jesus is not saying that a **serpent** on a pole can heal you; he is saying that just as the **serpent** was lifted up in the wilderness to heal, so he, Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, must be lifted up on a cross to save.

You must lift up your eyes, Nicodemus! You must be **born from above**. You must discover the incredible world of the Spirit. And if nothing else will lift up your eyes and your heart, then the sight of me will lift them up.

Do you see where this **serpentine**, meandering story of the **snake** has taken us? From the desert wanderings of Moses' rag-tag band to the hill of Calvary; and there we hear the call to lift up our eyes and see the one who saves us and gives us abundant life. Now the snake of Moses has led us to that favorite verse, that "*gospel in a nutshell*": "*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.*" And then this great, final word: "*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.*"

Maybe you've been in church all your life. Maybe you're a "*none*" with no affiliation. Maybe you're a seeker like Nicodemus, checking Jesus out under the cover of night. Whoever you are, remember this: *he did not come to condemn you, but to save you and give you life*. Lift up your eyes. Lift up your hearts.

Our **serpentine** story has come to this: "*For God so loved the world.*"

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, CHRIST, AND HOLY SPIRIT.... Amen.