

Ophidiophobia

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“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. ¹⁷“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. ¹⁸Those 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. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

--John 3:14-21

This passage is the second part of a longer passage about Nicodemus, a Jewish leader and teacher who visits Jesus at night because he's afraid somebody might see him. It's a great story. I understand Nick's need to visit under cover of darkness; he's supposed to already know this stuff, or at least he's supposed to know something about how people relate to God. In fact, even Jesus pointed out that Nicodemus ought to have already known:

Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.

Nicodemus has a pretty firm grasp on religion as he knows it. After all, other people look to him for guidance and wisdom. There's something about Jesus, though ... something that defies what Nicodemus thought he already knew. Jesus doesn't take it easy on him, either. Jesus makes some particularly pointed statements, and Nicodemus finds himself in over his head. I know how he feels; I think Jesus and I must have conversations like that every time I open the Bible.

Jesus presents Nick with an analogy taken from the book of Numbers in the Hebrew Bible. The children of Israel are on their way, and they start whining:

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⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." ⁶Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

God can certainly be creative about discipline. When the people whined about trivia, God sent poisonous snakes to bite them. It wasn't just that they were whining: it seems they had lost sight of what God had done for them and what God had called them to do. Instead of thinking about what God had saved them for, they complained about the food. My childhood pastor used to tell the story of a fellow who had been out fishing when he fell into the water. He splashed and sputtered, flailing about hopelessly until it looked as though he was about to go down for the proverbial third time. Suddenly someone appeared in a johnboat with an outboard motor, hauled the poor man into the boat and got him breathing again. The nearly drowned man opened his eyes, looked around the boat, and said with disbelief: "Evinrude? Why didn't you get a Johnson?"

It is probably the surest sign that God's people have lost their focus, lost sight of their goal, taken their eyes off the prize, and gotten their priorities mixed up: they begin to whine about trivia. They find petty things to fight about. They start looking at what everybody else is doing wrong, and forget to look at their own commitments. They begin to believe that the church exists to meet their needs and wants, and forget that the mission is always, first and foremost, to proclaim the Good News to people who haven't heard it yet. When this happens to us, we're bound to get bitten by whatever snakes may be handy: usually, we serve as each other's snakes.

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Think of it this way: Israel's problem wasn't really the snakes: they merely serve in the story as God's way of getting their attention. The problem really is that the people forgot what was important and concentrated on what was trivial. A Lutheran Pastor in California pointed out that if a snake on a pole is the solution to the problem of snakes on the ground, then a Savior on a pole must be the solution to people behaving like snakes on the ground: the only way to get rid of the snakes that bite us is to look upon that Savior lifted up on a cross.

Throughout history, human beings have had what you might call "chronic hereditary ophidiophobia." I found three different ways to spell that word, so it may not be exactly right in your bulletin, but what it means is that we have a fear of snakes passed down to us for generations. I'm sure that when Jesus talks about the story Moses lifting up the bronze serpent in the wilderness, he got the attention of those who were listening. Snakes get our attention. But Jesus, lifted up on the cross, isn't the solution to the kind of snakes we're afraid of; he is, instead, the solution to the kind of snakes we sometimes are.

When is our own behavior snakelike? When do we bite people? It seems to me that it happens when we forget that the object of God's love is not primarily the church, but the world, of which the church is a subset. That famous verse, verse 16, says it very clearly: "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 church is the God has chosen to accomplish the goal, not the goal itself. Everything we do in the church or as a church is designed to accomplish God's goal of loving the world; that was the mission Jesus embarked upon during his earthly journey, and that's the mission Jesus relays to us.

As long as we're concentrating on the bigger goal, we do well; we work together, we cooperate, we give of ourselves and of our resources. The trap is sprung when we let

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ourselves become too comfortable; we get things fixed up just the way we like them, and we put our energy into trying to keep them that way. We start to watch each other, making sure no one tries to take away our favorite things, and if they do, we bite them.

I'll bet you know as many stories as I do on this topic. If you've been around a church for any length of time, you've seen someone make a mountain out of a molehill; it's what we do. Back in the mid eighties I pastored a church way out in the country; if we had ten people, we considered it a revival. A half-mile down the road, there was another church of my denomination, pastored by one of my friends. We talked with each other about bringing the two congregations together, but our people wouldn't have anything to do with the idea. After some serious digging, we uncovered the truth: the congregations had split over how a chimney was to be built, and there were still hard feelings thirty years later.

Even Christians are capable of being petty, sometimes. All it takes is for us to take our eyes off the cross for a minute or two. All it takes is for us to focus our attention on ourselves. It's hard, on the other hand, to stay focused on the mission. It can be difficult to keep our minds on working for Jesus; we're easily distracted by our disappointments and frustrations.

In order for that bronze serpent to work, people had to see it, to focus their attention on it. By comparing his own mission to that serpent on a pole, Jesus is challenging the way Nicodemus understood religion, and maybe the way we understand religion as well. It isn't just an abstract idea; it isn't just that Jesus somehow vaguely takes care of it. It is, instead, that Jesus is lifted up for all to see; if we stay focused on him, the snake bites seem to become far less important. The metaphor doesn't work unless we remember who Jesus came for: was it me? Yes, but not only me. Jesus also came for that person who annoys me, the one I'm afraid of, the one I can't stand.

For God so loved...who was it again?