

LENT 4B – 2018 (Girl Scout Sunday)

Numbers 21: 4-9

Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2: 1-10

John 3: 14-21

Who likes Snakes????

- If you like snakes, give a reason why????
- If you don't like snakes, give a why not??

Today's Bible lessons talk a lot about snakes! Riley read the story of the Hebrew people wandering in the wilderness after their escape from slavery. In this part, the people have been in the wilderness for forty years. They are at the gateway of the Promised Land, getting ready to take move in and take over. Throughout the journey, there has been grumbling and complaining about the hardships of freedom...always the question: **Why did we leave Egypt where we had hard lives in slavery, but it was predictable and stable?** Change is hard, habit is easy. These people had been changing and moving for forty years.

For forty years God has cared for these people. God has given them water from a rock in the desert when they were thirsty; manna (bread) raining down

from the sky day after day to keep them from hunger, flocks of quail for meat; and, just before this story, God has helped them win a war to take the land he promised them from the time they left slavery.

Still, after all God has done, the Hebrew people are endless complaining about God and Moses, their leader. God is tired of their constant complaining, so he sends snakes among the people.

(Let's talk a minute about snakes. Almost no one likes snakes. One of the first stories in the Bible is about Adam and Eve, the first man and woman made by God. Their story includes a snake who lies to Eve and talks her into eating a fruit that God told her to leave alone. The first SIN; the first time anyone did something that God told them not to do. Sin started with a snake.

In most stories, snakes are evil and sneaky enemies. In Harry Potter, the snake is always with the Voldemort. Whether you are watching Aladdin or the X-Files; seeing snakes means bad things are going to happen!!!!

On Saturday, we'll celebrate St. Patrick. One of the reasons we remember St. Patrick is that he was able to get the snakes to leave the people of Ireland alone. Everywhere, even back when the Hebrew people were wandering in the wilderness, snakes were considered evil, frightening and dangerous.

The snakes in today's story were poisonous snakes that attacked and killed the people of Israel. Not surprisingly, the terrified people turned back to God, said they had sinned and that they were sorry. They basically said: **OK, God, we apologize to you and Moses for talking bad about you; please take away the snakes now!!!** Hearing his people, God told Moses how to fix the snake problem.

What answer would you think of? Make the snakes go away? That's not what God did! God uses anything and everything to love and protect His people. He loves us enough to use all his power and creativity to fix our problems. But often, the answer to our prayers, our requests to God, are not what we expect.

This kind of love is so unusual, we tell stories about it. There's a modern Alaskan native story called Mama, Do You Love Me?ⁱ The little girl asks: "Mama, what if I carried our ptarmigan eggs, and I tried to be careful and I tried to walk slowly, but I fell, and the eggs broke? Mama answered: Then I would be sorry. But still, I would love you. What if I threw water at our lamp? Then, Dear One, I would be very angry, but I would love you. What if I stayed away and sang with the wolves and slept in a cave? Then, Dear One, I would be very sad. But still, I would love you. God's love is like that.

Who knows the story of The Runaway Bunny? The bunny thought of all sorts of ways to run away and hide from his mother – a trout in a stream that swam away, a rock on a high mountain; a tiny crocus flower and a sailboat that sails away. The mother responded to all of those with an answer. She would become a fisherman that would catch the trout, a mountain climber that would go up to the rock, a gardener that would see the flower, and a wind that would blow the sailboat to where the mother wanted it to go.ⁱⁱ There

was nothing that would stop her love for her bunny. God is like that, too.

In today's Bible story, God told the leader, Moses, to make a bronze image of the poisonous snake, a fiery snake, and put on the top of a large pole in the center of the camp. (Not really like this, but you get the idea!) If a person was bitten, they went to look at the snake on the pole and they did not die. God used the very thing the people were most scared of to solve the problem. God did not take away the snakes; snakes still slithered around and bit people. But God made a way for people to be saved from the snakebites, by turning to the place where God was directing their attention. To be saved, they just had to look up to the snake hanging on the pole. Soon after this story, the people finished wandering in the wilderness and took up residence in the Promised Land. The story of God's people and how he cared for them over the generations continued.

God continued to love and save his people. The Bible tells many stories of how God acted in

unexpected ways to rescue, feed and comfort people. Centuries later, Jesus was born and began teaching and traveling around the cities and towns. This story happens just after last week's story of Jesus getting angry, letting sheep and cattle run loose, and turning over the tables in the temple. The temple officials are angry, and the leaders start trying to figure how to get rid of Jesus. One of those temple officials, a man named Nicodemus, comes Jesus. They talk about God. Jesus uses strange language, with images of birth and death, wind and water, and light and darkness.

As he talks about God, Jesus goes back to the old story that they both know; the one about the Hebrews and the snakes. The story of the life-giving snake on a pole in the desert was one that all the people heard since they were little. Jesus said: ***In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him,***

trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life. *(the message)*

Just like God gave the brass snake on a pole to the wandering Hebrews, Jesus gave the people a new way to be saved from the frightening things of this world. By looking up at Jesus, raised up before us, we can be saved from death and live. Soon in church time, Jesus will be raised on the cross to die, raised to his new life in the resurrection, and raised up to heaven to bring us a new life, too. As the Hebrew people needed to look on at a bronze snake to be saved, we need to focus on the cross, placing Jesus at the center of our attention.

Jesus goes on to explain that God's people can move from evil and darkness by confessing and returning to God; just as those Hebrews confessed to their sins and were given a way to be saved. The season of Lent is a time when we face the things that scare us, so that we may turn back to God and move into the light of Christ. There, we can be safe beyond

our fears and anxieties and all the things that can hurt us.

The point of these stories is that no matter what, God continues to love us and want us with Him. To be with God, to have God's protection, we need to pay attention to God and the things of God; not to the evil around us. God will take care of us. God's fix is not usually the one we ask for in our prayers. Instead, we are saved, wherever we are, when we look upon Jesus, lifted up for us. This is the sign that saves us.

These Bible lessons are filled with the truth of how God's love is always reaching out to save us. God never fails in his love and mercy for his people. God loves us, all of us, and God is still ready to make us new

Continue in a Holy Lent, keeping your eyes on Jesus, lifted before you and drawing you near, away from whatever fears and sins and evil that are around you now. Pay attention to Jesus and let God fill you with strength and courage and love. **AMEN**

ⁱ Barbara M. Joosse

ⁱⁱ Margaret Wise Brown.