

Numbers 21: 4-9  
Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22  
Ephesians 2: 1-10  
John 3: 14-21

*SNAKE HANDLING*

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A couple of years ago, a teen buddy of mine  
texted his step-mother one evening while on the Appalachian Trail:  
“Which way that I almost died today do you want to hear about first?”  
“What!!!!” was the response. “Call me now!”  
Well, first thing out of camp in the morning there were two black bears  
within spitting distance - the one going right up the trail ahead of us.  
Then in the afternoon, we stopped at a stream to refill our water bottles,  
Seth goes off to “water a rock,” comes back to us, and says,  
“Fr. Erb, I just stepped over a rattling snake.”  
“Not a rattle snake,” I queried, “but a snake that was rattling?!?”  
He nods.  
“Oh my God! You’re kidding!!”

Snake handling.

Certain churches in Appalachia  
still use snake-handling as a means of proving a person’s faith.  
My hunch is that if your religion asks strange or unreasonable things,  
you might need a new religion.  
They would probably say my faith is too safe  
and therefore can’t be a true faith.  
But God *has* saved me from the poison of a snake bite - The Snake -  
The Snake of Eden, The Snake of Gethsemane.

Nonetheless, we have this strange story -  
of the Hebrew people being bitten by serpents because of their sin,  
bitten by The Snake, himself,  
as John calls him in his Revelation:  
“...that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world”

*Revelation 12:9*

Then Moses is being told by God to make an image of a snake.  
Make an image -  
the God who told those same people never to craft an image.  
If you remember, it was #2 of the Big Ten we rehearsed [this morning].  
A graven image, in the old translations, an idol, so to speak.

Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of anything that is in  
heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth. *BCP p.318*

Now God is telling Moses to make an image of a snake  
to save the people from death.  
What a strange story, indeed!  
It doesn't make sense.  
But as we rehearse the Big Ten or more simply the Great Two Commands,  
our religion makes perfect sense.

"You remember that story about Moses and the snakes?" Jesus says.  
"Well, let me tell you what it means."  
And as that evening of the Resurrection, on the road to Emmaus,  
Jesus unpacks the meaning of Scripture  
for those who are searching for answers and meaning.  
Just before today's reading, Nicodemus comes to Jesus  
in the secrecy of night  
when Jesus tells Nicodemus about being born again.

And it doesn't make sense.  
John in his Gospel, of course, is hinting of Baptism,  
and turning from darkness to light.  
John seems to contradict himself, or has Jesus contradicting himself.  
"The Son of God didn't come into the world as a judge, but as a savior."  
Then Jesus talks about the exoneration of those who believe in the Son,  
and the judging of those who don't believe.

But the rub comes in Jesus' closing statements:  
This is how the judgment works: the light has come into the world, but people love the  
darkness rather than the light, because their deeds are evil. Those who do evil things  
hate the light and will not come to the light, because they do not want their evil deeds  
to be shown up. But those who do what is true come to the light in order that the light  
may show that what they did was in obedience to God. *John 3: 19-21*

It reminds me not only of the Two Great Commandments,  
or the Big Ten,  
all of which make perfect sense.  
But also what the prophet Micah teaches,  
as he reminds the people of Moses and the Exodus from slavery:  
"What is required of you, is to love justice,  
do mercy and walk humbly with your God." *Micah 6:8*

Simple.  
Logical.  
God doesn't ask the impossible.  
God provides us with the sensible,  
the plain and simple expressions of our faith.

John reminds us, in Jesus' voice:  
that the Light is given, but we prefer Darkness.

We can walk as children of the Light  
and not dwell in the shadows of death.  
While that Serpent of Destruction seeks to encircle us,  
squeezing us and biting into us, feeding us its poison,  
the Light of God would release us from its murderous grip.

We are in a world filled with voices and actions of venom.  
But God came into this world of snakes  
and even on the day of his death he went into the pits of hell,  
the den of Satan – that snake of evil, sin and death -  
With following Christ we can overcome -  
we climb out of that den of vipers,  
we are lifted above it all.

Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness  
to expose the falsehood of sin.  
Christ is lifted high on the Cross  
to unveil the truth of forgiveness.

God came not into the world to condemn the world.  
But that the world - one individual at a time - might be saved.  
After all, it is Satan who judges:  
God came not into this world to condemn the world,  
but that the world through him might be saved.

*John 3:17*

Jesus came to advocate for us before the judge,  
to teach, to heal, and to save.  
God so loved the world.  
And that's the joy of being an Episcopalian: no snake handling,  
Just simple love.

The Commandments are simply logical!  
Love God;  
Love your neighbor;  
Love yourself.

No snakes.  
Thank God!

## CHILDREN'S SERMON

adapted from Sermons4Kids.com

*a measuring cup, a tape measure, and a watch.*

You've been to an amusement park where they have a measuring stick,  
and the attendant says, "Nope, you're too small.  
You don't measure up."  
And you don't get to go on the ride.

"God loved the world so much."  
How much is so much?  
How can you measure it?

*measuring cup*

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my  
cup overflows. *Psalm 23:5*

*tape measure*

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and  
length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. *Ephesians 3:18-19*

*pocket watch*

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. *1 Chronicles 16:34*

I guess you just can't measure how much God loves us.

Let us pray.

O, God, we know that we cannot measure how much you love each and every one of us, but we do  
know that you loved us so much that you sent Jesus to us to teach us, to heal us, to help us, and to save  
us from doing evil things. Keep us safe every day, and guide us in doing what is good and right.  
AMEN.