

Sermon

15 March 2015

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: Numbers 21:4-9 & John 3:14-21

Snakes. Most people don't like snakes very much – and with good reason, because there are snakes that can kill you instantly. Although – my 2 boys are quite fascinated by snakes. The only snakes they have ever encountered here in Scotland were harmless ones, kept in zoos, but it was a completely different story when we went to South Africa after Christmas! Because there, in the space of one week, we saw 2 snakes in the wild.

And what a mission to try and explain to the boys that those snakes couldn't be touched, because they could be extremely poisonous! We had to teach them that in Africa, if you walk somewhere, you need to watch your step – because a snake will bite you if it feels threatened. And if you want to get out of the sun and go sit under a tree, you always look up first to see if there is not maybe a snake lying on one of the branches... And if there is, you stay clear of that tree, because if it is a black mamba – it only takes one bite and then that's the end of you.

Snakes love heat – so especially on a warm day in the summer, people in Africa watch their step carefully. And the same thing must have been

true for the Israelites travelling through the desert all those many years ago...

In Old Testament times society was ruled by *cause and effect*. If you lived a good life, positive consequences followed, but if you didn't, you had to pay the price for your actions.

God freed his people from slavery in Egypt, but instead of being thankful for that, they were unfaithful to him and they didn't trust Him at all. So God decided that he'd lead them to the Promised Land like he said he would, but that it would take them 40 years to get there, so that whole unfaithful generation could die out first.

The passage we read from Numbers took place as they were almost approaching the Promised Land. By now they were fed up with being in the desert and they had started complaining about everything. They said to Moses and to God: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

These were people who could literally see the presence of God surrounding them all day, because during the day God protected them with a huge big cloud and during the night he sent them a pillar of fire. When there wasn't any food around he sent them manna from heaven and when there wasn't any water he gave Moses water from a rock. They were only miles away from their new home now – but listen to them!

They sound like naughty children! When my boys are wanting crisps or sweeties, although there is a cupboard and a fridge full of food, they'll often go: Mum, why is there NOTHING in this house to eat?! And if they want to do something or go somewhere and I can't, I often get: We NEVER get to go ANYWHERE, when in fact we very often do exactly what they want to do and go exactly where they want to go!

And I'm sure that ours is not the only house in which this wee scene plays out quite often! Now doesn't that sound just like the Israelites?!

So, to teach our children a lesson, we sometimes give them consequences for their behaviour, less 'telly time' or 'time out', and we do that because we love them, because we want to teach them how to behave appropriately and we don't want them to turn into spoiled brats – and that is exactly what God did with the Israelites – although 'time out' in their culture looked a little different from today!

God sent poisonous snakes, to remind them how much they had to be thankful for. And *then* all of a sudden they realised that they had done wrong and they wanted to make it right! Like I said, just like naughty children...

Because the minute I tell one of my boys: "Okay mister, no more computer games for you today", the immediate response always is – "I am sooooo sorry mummy, I'll never be disobedient again!!"

So then, as always, God felt sorry for his people and told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Anyone who was bitten could look up at the snake and would live.

In the New Testament, in the Gospel according to John, we read that:
“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

In Jesus, God turned everything around. The ‘eye-for-an-eye culture’ of the Old Testament was now replaced by ‘living a life of love’.

God realised that punishing his children for their wrong choices only had good consequences on the short term, and that in time they always fell back into their wrong ways. So he decided to send his own son to take all of their sins upon him and get rid of it once and for all on the cross.

So just as an Israelite who was bitten by a snake only had to look up to the bronze snake if he wanted to live, so we only need to look up to Jesus on the cross if we want to live, if we want everlasting life.

Because life’s not really changed very much from Old Testament times – we live in a broken world.

In the Old Testament story, the snakes didn’t disappear altogether when the people begged God to save them, but God gave them a solution for when they were bitten.

Life here on earth is not perfect. We still have snakes crawling around us every day – illness, heartache, poverty, loneliness, bereavement, people who betray our trust, people who hurt us, things that happen to us that we just cannot understand.

And very often we pray to God, asking him to help us, and then, if he doesn't take our problems away instantly, we become upset – like naughty children not getting their own way.

When actually, all we have to do is look up at Jesus. The snakes will always be there, but at least we have the comfort of knowing that if one of these snakes bite us, we only need to look up, and we'll live.

Our problems will never become too much for us to handle if we remember that we don't have to handle it all by ourselves.

If you only focus on your problems, you'll never find a solution. But if you look up to Jesus, you'll get perspective on your situation. If all you see around you is snakes crawling into every wee corner of your life, you are going to panic; but even if there really are snakes all around you, if you look up to Jesus, you won't see them all that well.

You'll see Him – giving his life so you can live. You'll see love. Actual, real, love. You'll feel hope.

Because no matter how hard life is for you at times, no matter how many things bother you and how many things go wrong – you'll always have Jesus to look up to. Jesus who quite literally took the poison out of the bite – because he gave us *life*, no matter what, and forever.

So this Lent – let's look up, and live!!

Amen