

Sermon: Choose Life
4 Lent, Year B
John3:14-21

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One day when I was back in seminary I was up in the early hours of the morning beginning my daily routine of praying in the living room. It is usually my practice to get up while it is still dark, light a candle, and be in prayer. Well, at one point, I opened my eyes and in the twilight I saw something on the floor in front of me that looked like a belt. I thought, "That's kind of strange", and went on praying. Then I opened my eyes again and thought, huh, that kind of looks like a snake. Not wanting to ponder it a second longer, I turned on the light and sure enough there was Slitherton, our son Sam's pet snake, who had slithered out of his cage just to wake me up that morning. And I was indeed fully awake in that moment.

Years later, we had a house in the woods. My husband Steve was showing his father around the house, and while they were in the basement Steve decided to move the laundry from the washing machine to the dryer. While still talking to his father and not looking very closely at what he was doing, he reached into the washing machine, took one handful of clothes, threw them in the dryer, then reached in again for the second handful, threw them in the dryer as well, chatting to his dad along the way. When he looked in to grab the third batch, there was a copperhead embedded right in with the clothes, and having gone through the spin cycle a couple of times, he was stunned and not exactly moving fast. But he was very clean. Steve was so shocked he let some words fly that he wouldn't normally let fly. He and his father were able to get the snake outside without any further trouble. A moment he won't forget. Most of us don't forget our snake stories.

Today in our Old Testament lesson we have snakes (serpents) in the desert. Not exactly an image most of us relish! In the Book of Numbers we have a lot of grumpy and impatient Israelites who have been bitten by serpents. So the people come to Moses and ask him to pray to God to help them and make the serpents go away, so he does. And God tells him to make a bronze poisonous serpent and put it on a pole. So when people were bitten and looked at the serpent, they would live. I don't know what this passage is really all about. No commentary I have read gives a satisfying answer as to its meaning. Some passages in Scripture may have made a lot of sense to the people in a particular time and I imagine this one did, but now, not so much.

So instead, let's take a look at the gospel reading, because I think this one, while written 2,000 years ago does indeed speak to our time. After Jesus refers to the serpent scene of our Hebrew Testament reading, he goes on to talk about how God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that those who believe in him would not perish but have eternal life. Most of us have heard this passage umpteen times over the years. That passage is sometimes used to exclude others, to determine who is in and who is out of the realm of God's love. But the next part is not quite as familiar, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Jesus says "people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."

I wonder when do we love the darkness rather than the light that Jesus offers us? Jesus' words echo Moses' exhortation from Deuteronomy: "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity...choose life." (30:15, 19b) And as one of my dear colleagues expressed it this week, "You don't have to guess! The answer is right there in front of you." Choose life.

Jesus is offering life. And yet we so often choose darkness instead.

We are in the middle of Lent when this theme of light and darkness is paramount. How have we loved the darkness over the light? Have we chosen to gossip rather than to support? Have we chosen to judge someone rather than to listen to their story? Perhaps to feed our addictions rather than to honor God? Have we given in to the temptation to be self righteous rather than to have humility? Have we chosen to be self absorbed rather than to care for others? Have we chosen to hate or to be indifferent rather than to love? Choosing darkness over light can happen in obvious ways such as physically harming God's creation, both people and the rest of the environment, but it happens in subtle, less obvious but insidious ways, too. It can happen in our being obtuse, too stubborn to hear another side of a story when we are so sure we are right. Sometimes the darkness is comfortable and we find it easy to dwell there.

Maybe some aspect of the Numbers story is coming to light after all. Perhaps the serpents served a purpose after all. It was the serpents that got the people's attention, that prompted them to turn to God in the midst of their trouble. They had loved darkness, the darkness of complaining, of impatience and faithlessness. In turning to Moses, they were also turning to God and choosing life, choosing a loving way forward.

Isn't this our Lord's desire for us? That we recognize the ways we love the darkness in our lives and that with God's help we choose light over darkness, that we choose life over death, that we choose to believe in and turn to a power greater than ourselves to lift us up into a greater way? That we choose to love?

The answer is right there in front of you. What will you choose?

Amen.