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## Lifted Up

Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-21

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 15, 2015 by the Rev. Sarah Stockton Howell

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*From 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. The 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." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The 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. And 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." So 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. – Numbers 21:4-9*

*And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "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. "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. Those 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. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But 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*

In October of 1991, Glenn Summerford tried to kill his wife. The weapon was not a gun or a knife or Summerford's hands; instead, it was a poisonous snake.

You see, Glenn Summerford was the pastor of the Church of God with Signs Following, and the Church of God with Signs Following was a snake handling church. Snake handlers take a literal interpretation of a passage in Mark 16 that says believers can pick up snakes and drink poison without being harmed. Last week, my grandparents asked what I was preaching on this Sunday. When I replied, "Snake handling," there a shocked silence, followed by my grandmother's astute question, "Will there be a demonstration?"

Glenn Summerford was beloved by his small, poor, rural congregation. But one night, he got drunk, and with a gun to his wife Darlene's head, he forced her to put her hand into a box full of rattlesnakes.

*New York Times* reporter Dennis Covington visited the Church of God with Signs Following while he covered Summerford's trial. But Covington became fascinated with the community he found there and kept coming back. Eventually, he became so caught up in the movement

that he took up a serpent himself. His journalistic and spiritual journey is documented in the excellent book [Salvation on Sand Mountain](#).

However, the first worship service that Covington attended at the Church of God with Signs Following had no snake handling at all. In fact, it barely even had a sermon. With Summerford in prison, there was no true preacher on hand to lead the services. The congregation had shrunk in the wake of the scandal. Those who remained worked together to keep things going.

In this first worship service, a layman stood up to preach. He took out his Bible, opened it to the Gospel of John, and read one familiar verse:

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”*

Then he closed the Bible, and he sat down. Covington remarked that it may have been the shortest sermon in history, and some of you here today might wish I had followed this man’s example.

*“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.”* No one can escape John 3:16. You can see it on bumper stickers. The fast-food chain Cookout prints it on their Styrofoam cups. Tim Tebow [painted it on his face](#) for a football game, for goodness’ sake. The verse is so familiar that it has largely lost its meaning, so tired that assumptions about its implications are rarely questioned.

But I just love that a snake handling preacher would quote John 3:16, because right there, in John 3:15, is a reference to our other serpentine story for today: “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”

So now we’re back in Numbers 21, in the wilderness with the Israelites. They are fresh out of Egypt—well, not so fresh. They’ve been traveling a long time and seemingly getting nowhere. Liberation has lost its luster, exodus is empty of excitement, deliverance is dead of delight, and freedom has faded from favor.

If being hungry and thirsty and just plain grouchy weren’t enough, suddenly their campsite is infested with poisonous snakes—or, to quote the King James Version, “fiery serpents.” As Indiana Jones would [say](#), “Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?”

Of course, the snakes in the wilderness were no laughing matter. People died. And the remedy was as horrifying and bizarre as the malady itself: *“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.”*

What a strange and terrible thing, to save one’s life by looking on an image of death. That bronze serpent stood in the midst of their camp, in the very place where survivors had lost

husbands and wives and children and parents and friends, a constant reminder of all they had been through and yet, somehow, the source of their healing.

If any of you are among the half of American adults who are afraid of snakes, you might have had a hard time even saving your own life there in the wilderness. Some scientists believe that the fear of snakes may have been impressed upon humans evolutionarily, and for good reason—for millennia, staying away from snakes has helped countless humans survive.

Of course, for people of the Word, this fear hearkens all the way back to the fall, when God curses the snake to slither on its belly and says, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; [the man] will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.”

It turns out that the slither may be precisely what makes us so afraid of snakes. Last weekend, I binge-listened to every episode of NPR’s [Invisibilia](#) podcast while cleaning my house. One episode is called [“Disappearing Fear,”](#) and it takes a closer look at the common fear of snakes.

It turns out that when pressed to say why they fear snakes, many people will give one reason: the way snakes move just doesn’t make sense. Even when you get into the physics of the slither, scientists can’t quite explain how it works. And we fear what we do not understand.

Evolutionary science and Bible teaching notwithstanding, the fear of snakes is not necessarily inbred. Children are not automatically afraid of snakes but must be taught that fear, for their own good. My friend Martha loves to tell a childhood story of the time she found a nest of baby snakes in her garden. She promptly stuffed them in her pockets and ran in the house to show her mother. Her mother, needless to say, was not pleased.

We fear what we do not understand, and although it may be healthy to have some fear of say, snakes, there are other things that we do not understand and therefore fear but which might save our life. We fear snakes because their movement doesn’t make sense, it is something we cannot control; don’t we fear placing our trust in God because God’s love doesn’t make sense and is something we cannot control?

*House of Cards* is a political drama on Netflix, and although I haven’t watched a single episode, I had to learn more about [a scene](#) I heard about from season 3, episode 4. The scene features Frank Underwood, a Machiavellian character who has moved from the Vice Presidency to the Presidency largely through scheming and manipulation.

In the scene, Underwood is in a church, speaking with a priest, and he says something that resonates with his power-hungry character. Looking at a large crucifix, he says, “I understand the Old Testament God, whose power is absolute, who rules through fear. But him... [He turns to the crucifix.] Love. That’s what you’re selling? Well, I don’t buy it.”

Plenty of Christians were up in arms after this episode aired. But I think the scene was right on point. To the brutal, the powerful, the manipulative, the Machiavellian, the love of God doesn't make sense.

But I learned, too, that Frank Underwood grew up in a home ravaged by alcoholism. His father was abusive. No wonder he understands absolute power and rule by fear. No wonder he just can't buy the love God offers on the cross. Power and fear, he gets. Love—not so much.

It seems that God should condemn and not save, and yet on the cross God makes it clear that Jesus came not to condemn but to save. Condemnation would actually make sense. But instead, God chooses love and invites us to do the same. Yet so often we fear God's love just as much as if not more than we fear God's wrath.

In *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, Dennis Covington notices that in the hills of southern Appalachia, there are both literal and metaphorical snakes. He writes, "This legacy of Southern history[—poverty, ignorance, racism, and defeat—]was as dangerous as any rattlesnake. No one wanted to claim it. No one wanted to take it out of the box."

The other day, I met with a small group of young clergy in the Triad. We are part of a new informal network being built to help us have healing conversations about human sexuality and the future of the church. The questions put before us by a colleague had nothing to do with biblical or theological arguments for or against anything. Instead, we asked one another—where in this debate do you see pain?

One of my friends was preparing to preach on this passage from Numbers, and he said he wondered if looking on the serpent to live were like looking on our sin and shame, that perhaps in that very conversation we were looking on our own serpents—the stories of rejection and division and misunderstanding and even suicide that swirl around the question of LGBTQ inclusion. It would have been easier for us to pull out the Bible or the United Methodist *Book of Discipline*, but instead we reached in the box, we lifted up our pain, and we looked on it in the hope that we all might live.

There is much sin and shame and secret hurt that we do not want to take out of the box. We have loved darkness rather than light, because light reveals what we would rather keep hidden. Yet if we are to be healed from the wounds of racism, poverty, inequality, sexism, violence, addiction, mental illness, and so much more, we must take these things out of the box and look on them.

Kalle Lasn is the founder of The Adbusters Media Foundation, who brought us such things as Buy Nothing Day and TV Turnoff Week. In his book [Culture Jam](#), Lasn tells the story of when he visited Tokyo in 1970. Japan was in the midst of an economic boom. Lasn showed his Japanese friends a picture of Jesus on the cross, and their response was this: "This cannot be a god. He looks too much like a loser to be a god."

Jesus looks like a loser because he looks like us. Paul says that Jesus, who knew no sin, was made sin for our sake. Jesus became sin. What we look on when we look on the cross is our sin and shame and fear and guilt lifted up for our sake. For just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness that the people might look on the source of their pain, so the Son of Man was lifted up on the cross that we might look and live.

The cross shines a light on the truth of who we are. If we are willing to look on it, we will see more than fear and pain and death. We will see love. It is in that light, the light of God's love, that all our sin and shame and hurt is held and illumined and healed and transformed.

My boyfriend, Colin, and I recently adopted a dog by accident. He's what we call a "foster failure"—2 weeks at my house turned into signing adoption papers. Crash, our sweet pit bull mix, has heartworm for which he is being treated. The treatment for heartworm is an injection of arsenic. You heard me right: we got our dog injected with poison. The treatment itself could kill him, yet it is the only way to rid him of the infestation of worms in his heart and chest cavity.

Some of you who have seen friends and family go through chemotherapy might think that sounds familiar. The treatment can be as horrible as the disease. This is true of snakebites, too—sometimes the risk of administering antivenin is as high as or higher than that of letting the venom run its course.

My friend Craig Kocher, who used to be the chaplain here at Duke, [wrote](#) this about our John passage this morning: "When Jesus says, 'God so loved the world,' Jesus is asking us to see the God who created the world out of love as the same God who is lifted high on the cross in redeeming love. Sometimes it is hard to know whether love feels like dying or being lifted up, like the cross of Good Friday or the glory of Easter morning."

"Sometimes it is hard to know whether love feels like dying or being lifted up." Dennis Covington saw this tension in the snake handlers of southern Appalachia. He said, "Handlers talk about *receiving* the Holy Ghost. But when the Holy Ghost is fully come upon someone...the expression on her face reads exactly the opposite—as though someone, or something, were being violently taken away from her. The paradox of Christianity...is that only in losing ourselves do we find ourselves, and perhaps that's why photos of the handlers so often seem to be portraits of loss."

The Israelites experienced great loss in the wilderness, and Christ on the cross looks like a loser. Jesus, too, went into the wilderness—from Mark 1:13: "He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts." Maybe a serpent or two?

And here we are on the fourth Sunday of Lent, just over halfway through our journey through the spiritual wilderness. We are surely with the wild animals both literal and metaphorical, but the Spirit has driven us here. We are losers, we are sinners, but that is not the deepest truth of who we are. We are defined not by our sin nor by our shame, not by our decisions nor by our defeat, not by our loss nor by our loneliness, not by our fear nor by our failure, but by the love of God.

It is in that assurance that we can let light shine on our sin; we can take our shame out of the box; we can lift up our metaphorical snakes. Throughout salvation history, from the snake in the garden to the serpents in the desert to Christ on the cross, God is ever calling us out from the wilderness of our fear into the healing safety of the divine arms stretched out and lifted up in love.

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him[—everyone who looks on him—]may not perish but may have eternal life.”*

Amen.