

Lent 4B 2018, Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21, March 11, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

Indiana Jones is the treasure seeking adventurer in a series of movies and books that include “Raiders of the Lost Ark,” “Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom,” and “Indiana Jones and the Crystal Skull.” By day, Henry “Indiana” Jones is a professor of archeology at a prestigious university. When he’s not teaching classes on ancient civilizations he dons his leather jacket, trademark fedora straps a bullwhip to his side and traverses the world seeking lost treasures. In the first movie, Jones is seeking the Lost Ark of the Covenant, that sacred chest the Israelites carried with them as they wandered in the wilderness, believed to be the very throne of God. Indiana Jones is fearless in the face of danger, battling Nazis and other various bad guys. There’s only thing he’s afraid of. When dropped into a hidden room from an opening above the floor he discovers the floor seems to alive and moving. When he grabs a torch and sees, he moans, “Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?” You see, snakes are the one thing Indiana Jones loses his courage over. He’s deathly afraid of snakes, no matter how big or small.

The film writer George Lucas tapped into one of humanity’s primal fears, a fear of snakes. Mysterious, sometimes poisonous, silent usually, snakes appear in ancient literature across the world. Often attributed with human characteristics such as guile and cunning, snakes were among the lowest creatures regarded by ancient peoples. Even the creation story in Genesis seeks to explain why snakes crawl along the ground on their bellies. The snake, a creature who could originally walk upright, sought to tempt Adam and Eve to disobey God. God’s punishment of the snake was to make it crawl on it’s belly, and to establish a perpetual fear on the part of human beings of its existence.

So, on the one hand, the story we just heard read from the book of numbers shouldn’t surprise us. The Israelites grumble to Moses in the wilderness. They have no food or water and they hate the manna they have to gather every morning to make cakes just to survive. God’s punishment? Snakes. Why did have to be snakes? OK, let’s back up a moment. We need to remember how they got to this point in the first place. Moses is leading God’s people, the Israelites, through the wilderness. They escaped from slavery in Egypt through the Red Sea. According to the book of Exodus, the Israelites cried out to God for deliverance from the harsh and inhumane treatment they received from their Egyptian task masters. God raised up a leader, Moses, who demonstrated God’s tremendous power to the Egyptian pharaoh. Ten plagues, each more severe than the last, with the final plague, the destruction of all Egyptian first-born, the most terrible of all. The rescue of Israel from slavery is the defining moment in the history of this people. Liberation, freedom, and dependence upon God become the remembered elements of story and song and prayer.

And yet, almost as soon as they are liberated from slavery, Israel starts complaining. They lodge their complaint to Moses. Earlier in Numbers we hear their real complaint: “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread.”

Have you ever towed along a child who is hungry and tired and out of sorts and all they can do is whine? “But I don’t want to go to the store? Why can’t I have Cocoa Puffs? I want to watch to TV. I don’t want to go to bed.” This sounds very much like what Israel is saying. We

are tired. We're hungry. Life was better in Egypt. We might have been slaves, but at least we had food on the table. What good is freedom if we are hungry?

God clearly didn't appreciate this line of reasoning. God sent poisonous snakes upon the people. Many were bitten and many died. The snakes are not evil themselves. They are only doing what poisonous snakes sometimes do. But the story points out an aspect of God we don't often like to hear. There is a mysterious side to God. A judging side of God. The God of love and mercy is balanced by the God of judgment and punishment.

Maybe Israel believed the freedom God won for them should also come with the material comforts they enjoyed in Egypt. Freedom from slavery plus the material benefits of good food, warm homes, security from invaders that the Egyptians provided.

I sometimes wonder that disciples of Jesus Christ living in the United States might confuse our freedom as Christians with American prosperity. Do the two ever go hand in hand in your own mind? What I mean is if your material wealth and prosperity were taken away from you, if all you had to eat was some mysterious manna that appeared each morning on the ground, would you still consider yourself free and liberated by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus? It's a tough question, and one maybe hard to answer. In reality we aren't presented with that choice. We've grown accustomed to living lives of discipleship and enjoying the highest standard of living in the world. But the sobering aspect of this story we heard this morning is that some people are very quick to trade in their God given freedom for a guaranteed three square meals a day.

When Israel wanted to trade their freedom for food God sent poisonous snakes as punishment for their sin. When the people realized their sin God commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. When the people looked at the pole they would survive any other bites. Clearly there is some kind of mythological, magical meaning here that escapes us. It must have escaped the Israelites also. This bronze serpent pole appears one other time in the Bible. Almost a thousand years later King Hezekiah cleanses all pagan practices from Israel. Hezekiah destroys the bronze serpent and pole because by this time it had become an object of worship in of itself. There's probably a lot of connection between how ancient people regarded snakes not only as threatening to live but also life-giving. Because the snake shed its skin each year many people thought the snake was immortal. We see this in the symbol for the Greek god Asclepius, the god of healing, who is depicted holding a pole with a single snake wrapped around it. The same symbol today is used throughout the medical professions.

It's Jesus in the gospel of John who makes the connection between the bronze serpent on the pole and himself. "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." Throughout the gospel of John Jesus speaks of being "lifted up." How is Jesus to be lifted up? Lifted up into heaven? Yes, but first Jesus must be lifted up on the cross. It's his being lifted up on the cross where all may gaze upon him in faith and finally be healed. That's the connection with the bronze serpent pole. God used the snakes as punishment for the people's sin, but then God also made the image of the punishment the very act of healing. So too in the cross. Death is the consequence of our rebellion against God. But now the death of the Son of God will become our very healing and life. To look upon the cross and see it as God's gift of life will be for our healing.

In Jesus being lifted on a cross we find our true and lasting freedom. This is our Exodus, our liberation from the slavery of fear and sin and even death itself. God wants us to live freely, free to serve God, free to serve our neighbor. God wants us to hold onto this freedom, cherish it, and not trade it in on the false security of material possessions, or even some secular, political

understanding of freedom. As important as our freedom as Americans may be to us, our freedom as Christians is of ultimate and final importance. We are free to love and serve for this reason and this one only, because the “Son of Man is lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Amen.