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Sermon 14 March 2021

Title: Snake on a Stick

- Good morning church—it is so good to be with you today—it is a good day to worship and to praise the Lord and to draw near to Him through His Word
- As we mentioned last Sunday, we are looking to the lectionary for our scriptures during these next few weeks in Lent, and as we journey toward Holy Week we are taking the time to do the hard work of meditating on the mystery of the incarnation—we do know that Easter is coming, and we know that we will then celebrate the glorious resurrection—but during these days we are taking time to walk the road that leads to the cross.
- The title of today’s sermon, as you will have already noticed if you’re watching the video, is “Snake on a Stick.” And you may be thinking, and it would be understandable if you are, that “Snake on a Stick” sounds like the worst idea ever for a fast food restaurant—like the last food stall that you’d want to visit at the county fair—“snake on a stick” sounds like it might be the least popular item on the menu at your local takeaway—but it isn’t. That’s not what this sermon is about.
- But it is undeniably true that food that’s on a stick is better than non-stick-related foods.
- I remember when I was a teenager, my friends and I used to hang out at the mall—the Regency mall, in Augusta Georgia, which was for a time the largest enclosed shopping mall in Georgia—800,000 square feet of space— it was a different world inside the mall—it had taken years to build, with its alabaster interior walls and its

terrazzo floors--its central court was surrounded by 45-foot columns and filled with all sorts of vendors and merchants —in that central food court, my friends and I used to frequent a restaurant called “Hot Dog on a Stick,” that was known for its corn dogs (on a stick of course) and lemonade. Those were good days—and those were great corn dogs.

- We thought the Regency Mall would last forever. But it has been empty and derelict for the last 20 years, and just a few months ago demolition began—they’re tearing it down—and it remains to be seen what will rise up in its place—
- Seems like nothing on earth lasts forever—all things must pass away
- But the popularity of food on a stick has not passed away yet—if anything it has increased—and there are a seemingly infinite number of foods that you can enjoy on a stick—not just corn dogs, but popsicles—ice lollies, I guess they’re called here—all kinds of ice cream--and candy apples, and other fruit like pineapple and strawberries, and all kinds of meat and veg-- I love to barbecue shrimp on skewers, and there’s shish kabab and chicken satay—pretty much, if you can eat it, you can find a recipe for preparing it on a stick—and you can probably find a restaurant somewhere with your favourite food, whatever it is, on a stick
- There’s a restaurant in Amsterdam—this is their food truck—called “Everything on a Stick”—and every single item on their menu, from starters to desserts, is served on a stick
- But one thing that you won’t find on their menu is “snake on a stick.”
- Now, being from the American South, I have eaten snake before and lived to tell about it, and it is not bad, but I do feel fairly certain that it would be much improved if it were prepared and served on a stick

- Because “Snake on a stick” IS a popular item on the menus of street vendors in Asian countries like China, and one of the reasons it is popular is because eating snake is associated with health benefits—traditional Chinese medicine views snake as a “warming food” that can help with all sorts of complaints—it’s good for what ails you—and part of the reason it has that reputation is because snakes have the extraordinary ability to shed their skin, sort of like leaving their old self behind and being reborn, being born again, and people want to get some of that power inside of themselves—they don’t want to perish—they don’t like to think of themselves as just passing away into the dusts of time like the Regency Mall in Augusta, Georgia.
- When I was in medical school, I learned about another “snake on a stick” that’s associated with health and healing, and that’s this one, known as the “Staff of Asclepius”—Asclepius was the god of healing in ancient Greece, and snakes were used in Asclepian temples—one Greek historian who was writing in the 1<sup>st</sup> century—around the time of Jesus-- said of Asclepius that he “derived his name . . . from deferring the withering that comes with death,” and that the serpent was associated with him because “those who avail themselves of medical science undergo a process similar to the serpent in that they, as it were, grow young again after illnesses and slough off old age.”
- All over the world, this symbol is associated with medicine—you see it on ambulances and in the logos of countless professional medical societies, like the British Medical Association and the American Medical Association and the World Health Organisation
- But as my professors in medical school were quick to point out, the “Staff of Asclepius” is not to be confused with this other symbol that is sometimes used in

medical contexts—this is the caduceus, the staff of the messenger god Hermes—those are his wings at the top there—it’s a symbol that is properly associated with printing and with business—and with thieves and liars-- and not with medicine, but because the caduceus does feature two snakes around a stick, it has been the source of some confusion, and this confusion became official in the United States when in 1902 the caduceus was adopted as the official symbol of the Medical Department of the US Army—there is considerable controversy as to why that happened, but because it happened, you’ll often see the caduceus used in medical contexts when it is not a symbol of medicine at all—but it does feature a snake around a stick—two in fact—and so you’ll see it occasionally—by the way, the US Army Medical Department now uses not the caduceus, but the more appropriate “Staff of Asclepius”—the snake on a stick that undoubtedly symbolises healing.

- There are instances of similar symbols associated with healing in cultures older than the Greeks, in Syria and India for instance
- But probably the oldest known description of a snake on a stick associated with healing is one that stretches way back before the birth of Christ, perhaps as far as 1300 years before
- And we read about it in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of the book of Numbers. And so when some folks see this image of a snake on a stick, they think not of Greek mythology, but of the history of the Hebrew people as recorded in the Old Testament
- Numbers 21: 4-9 is one of the lectionary readings for today—just 5 verses—and in them you’ll find that the Hebrew people have been led by Moses out of their bondage in Egypt—God has parted the Red Sea and they walked through on dry land—but now they are travelling through the wilderness—wandering, you could

say-- on their way to the Promised Land. They are not there yet, and there are some in the crowd who don't think they're ever going to get there. But while they're on the way, God is feeding them with manna from heaven, and some of them are getting tired of it. Maybe they should have tried it on a stick.

- But we're told in verse 4 that the people "became impatient on the way." In verse 5 we read that "The people spoke against God and against Moses—and this is what they said--"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.**"
- Now see right there you can hear the kind of contradictions that people get into when they start complaining—they say "there's no food, and we hate the food—this food is awful and there's not enough of it"—sounds like the kind of logic that Yogi Berra used to use, and it reminds me of a story I heard about these two dear ladies who used to meet at a restaurant here in Largs every Thursday for afternoon tea, and one day they were sitting at the table there, and one of them took a bite of her egg mayo and cress sandwich and looked sort of disgusted, and she said to the other, she said "Gladys, why do we keep coming to this place, the food is terrible—just awful" and Gladys said "Oh I know, Fiona, it is—and such small portions!"
- I know some people who look at their lives like that, don't you? Life is terrible and awful and miserable, and there's just not enough of it.
- You know when we get impatient and frustrated and in that complaining kind of attitude—we sometimes don't make a whole lot of sense—and we can see that in the things that the people who were wandering in the wilderness have to say about their situation—if we look back to Chapter 11 of the book of Numbers, we see that this is not the first time these people have complained about the way God's

providing for them—in Chapter 11 we see that they’re complaining and God burns down part of their camp, so they run to Moses and Moses prays to God and the fires die down, but right after that happens,

- We find some of the people—chapter 11 calls them the “rabble”—complaining that they don’t have any meat to eat—and they talk about how good they used to have it when they were slaves back in Egypt—oh, we had fish—for free—and cucumbers and melons and leeks and onions and garlic—oh, we had it good back then—now we’re going to starve because all we have is this manna that tastes like fried coriander cakes.
- So Moses talks to God and basically says, “what did I ever do to get burdened by this bunch of whining cry-babies—greetin’-faced weans, I think that’s the correct usage—now they want meat to eat—I have had it with them—if you’re going to treat me like this, why don’t you just kill me now?”
- And long story short God says “if they want meat, they’re gonna get meat—they’ll get so much meat it’ll be coming out of their noses—and God sends a wind that blows a whole mess of quail—like 3-feet deep all around the camp—and the people collect them, but as they’re eating them, while they’re still between their teeth, the people who were craving meat dropped dead on the spot.
- And you would THINK that the people would think twice about complaining after that. You would think that they would begin to appreciate God’s provision for them, that they would show some gratitude, like we talked about in our “Giving Thanks” sermon a few weeks ago.
- But as we talked about in that sermon, the human tendency to be ungrateful runs deep—it’s rooted all the way back in the garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve had

all they needed, in abundance, but said, “no this is not enough—we want that fruit that the serpent is telling us about”—they complain about what they’ve got and they want what they can’t have—

- And so do the Hebrew people wandering in the wilderness. Now, as I said, you would THINK that the run-in with those quail would put an end to their complaining, but it doesn’t. They complain again and again and again between chapter 11 and Chapter 21, and in verse 5, they’re still complaining. But before we judge them too harshly, we should remember that they’ve been wandering in the hot, barren desert for 40 years now, and they don’t seem to be making any progress.
- And things are about to get worse.
- In verse 6 we read: Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.
- Now we’re not told explicitly that God sent these poisonous snakes **because** of the people’s complaining, but we are told that the people complained, and then poisonous snakes showed up—God sent them, and they bit a bunch of people and they died. This is the way we often see events in history understood in the Pentateuch, the 5 books of Moses—if it happened, God did it.
- And once again, the Israelites realise that they have sinned—verse 7 reads: 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.
- Notice this now—the people asked Moses to pray that God would “take away the serpents from us.” That He would eliminate them, that they would go away.

- But the writer only tells us that Moses “prayed for the people.” And God responds. But He doesn’t respond by taking away the snakes. No, the snakes remain, as does the likely possibility of getting bitten.
- But listen to what God DOES do. Verse 8: 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.**"
- Then in verse 9: 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.**
- So God doesn’t remove the threat, God doesn’t magically change the situation in which the children of Israel find themselves, but He provides an antidote, so that those who are poisoned by the serpent’s attack will not perish—the danger doesn’t disappear—they will still get bitten—but if they look in the right direction, life will be given to them.
- Unfortunately, over time we find that the Hebrew people begin to treat the bronze snake on a stick as an idol, giving it a name and making offerings to it and not to the God who commissioned its creation—and so in 2 Kings chapter 18, we read that Hezekiah smashes it to bits, so that Moses’ snake on a stick is no more.
- But it does turn up again in the New Testament—we read about it in the gospel of John, in the passage that Pastor Tasha shared with us this morning.
- So let’s turn our attention to these scriptures for a little while. These verses are in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of John’s gospel, so quite early in his narrative, and of course I am sure that we all noticed that today’s reading contains what is probably the most memorized verse in the entire bible—I know that it was the first verse that I



memorized as a child, John 3:16—“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.” I memorized it in the King James Version, as I’m sure many of you did as well.

- But as important as it is to commit verses to memory, it’s even more important to understand the context that those verses appear in.
- And here in John’s gospel we are only at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter. John has told us in chapter 1 that Jesus is the living Word of God, who was with God and was God in the beginning, and who has become flesh. He was announced and baptised by John the Baptist, who recognized him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and he chose some disciples to follow him.
- In chapter two we see signs of Jesus’ power—there’s the wedding at Cana where Jesus turns water into wine, and more importantly for our context, the cleansing of the Temple—
- Now, the synoptic gospels wait for several chapters to tell us about this—Matthew includes it in chapter 21, Luke in Chapter 19, and Mark in Chapter 11. But John includes it in chapter 2. We mentioned this in our sermon last week, and John’s account was one of the lectionary readings--
- What happens there in the second half of chapter 2 is that Jesus is in Jerusalem and he goes into the temple and finds it filled with merchants and vendors and money-changers, and he makes a whip and drives them out with it.
- When the Jews who are there witness this—they ask him what sign he can show to prove His authority, and Jesus says “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Then the Jews said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six

years---they were probably thinking “no one’s going to destroy it—look at its columns and its alabaster walls”—and even if they did, how will you raise it up in three days?” But Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body, and the way that it would be destroyed on the cross and raised from the dead.

- The Jews were thinking of earthly things, while Jesus was speaking of heavenly things.
- Jesus continues to show signs to the people in Jerusalem, and so many people believe in him. And then in chapter 3, Jesus is visited in the dark of night by a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who has seen and heard what has been happening, and knows that Jesus is from God—he says so in verse 2.
- And Jesus tells him, as many of us have heard all our lives, that he must be born again. And Nicodemus says to him, in verse 4: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”
- Nicodemus might have added—“what am I, a snake that can shed its skin and be born anew?”
- And Jesus explains a bit more about what he means by being born from above, born of the Spirit, and Nicodemus still doesn’t quite get it—he asks “How can this be?” That’s when Jesus says to him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”
- Jesus asks Nicodemus how he’s going to believe heavenly things if he doesn’t even understand earthly things—and then to help him out, Jesus uses an example from the Torah—from the Books of Moses—and that’s where our scripture reading began today, verse 14: And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

- And then that verse we all know so well-- “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.”
- And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness—we know what that means—Numbers 21—there were serpents among the children of Israel in the wilderness—people were being bitten and the poison led to death—and God didn’t get rid of the snakes but provided a way to live, even in the midst of them--but God told Moses to lift up that snake on a stick and those who looked at it—those who believed in it—did not PERISH—and there’s a double-entendre there in that phrase “lifted up”—Jesus is talking about being lifted up on the cross, sacrificed, forsaken, destroyed—remember what he said about the Temple—but also about being exalted, resurrected, raised up and given a name above all other names
- Jesus is saying that just as that snake was lifted up, so he will be lifted up—and just as that snake saved those who looked to it from the poison and death that all those other snakes threatened the people with, so Jesus became sin, became a sin offering as Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5, even though he knew no sin, in order that we might not perish, that we could be saved from the power of sin to poison and kill
- And just like those snakes, God does not remove the danger of sin, nor the presence of sin around us, but provides an antidote that eliminates the power of sin within us—the one who is lifted up--the crucified and resurrected Jesus-- who has the power to reverse the curse of sin that has afflicted the human race since Adam and Eve were tempted in the Garden.
- And incidentally, if you look at historical paintings of that scene where Adam and Eve are tempted—you very often see that the serpent is coiled around the trunk and the

branches of the Tree of Good and Evil—that is, it’s a snake on a stick—the Bible is fascinating, isn’t it?

- Not only is Jesus the new Adam who, unlike the first Adam who brought sin and death into the world, brings redemption and life—
- unlike the forbidden fruit that hung on that tree and promised knowledge but brought death and shattered our relationship with God and creation, Jesus is also the one who hangs on a tree, who says of his body, take and eat unto salvation, who is the bread of life—whoever comes to him will never go hungry
- Unlike that snake on a stick in the Garden of Eden, whose temptation poisons humanity and leads to death and destruction, Jesus is the snake on a stick like the one Moses lifted up in the wilderness, that the children of Israel might not perish but live, and in the same way God gave his only Son that whoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life.
- Like that snake on a stick in the wilderness, Jesus was not sent to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him—so that those who believe are not condemned and those who do not look to source of salvation remain in their condemnation, like those who have been poisoned but who will not seek the antidote, those who suffer unto death but will not look to the very place where healing is found, in whom there is the power to be born again, to slough off the old self and be raised up a new creation.
- I hope you know that kind of healing, that kind of power, that kind of life-giving transformation this morning—if you don’t you can—just look to the one who is lifted up—

- Maybe you feel like you're wandering in the desert this morning—maybe you're hungry for something that satisfies—maybe you're thirsty for righteousness and holiness and forgiveness and redemption—maybe you're ready to shed the skin of guilt and sin, maybe you're tired of the old poisoned life of shame and condemnation—maybe like Nicodemus you wonder how can it be that a person can be born again—maybe you want to know what it means to have life everlasting—everlasting life that starts today—right now—maybe you want to know how to no longer be a slave to the powers of death and decay—just look to the one who is lifted up
- Look and live, as the hymnwriter says, look to Jesus now and live—it's recorded in his word, hallelujah, it is only that you look and live--step out of the darkness and into the light—in him there is no condemnation—seek forgiveness through repentance and your sins will be forgiven, and new life—everlasting life-- will be yours
- If you'd make that commitment this morning we rejoice with you and we'd love to hear from you—we encourage you to find fellowship with a body of believers, earnestly seek understanding in the Scriptures, pray without ceasing, take up your cross daily and follow Jesus' example every waking moment—may He be lifted up in your life each day.
- We're so glad you joined us today—God bless you and we'll see you next time