

There's just something about snakes, isn't there? I mean, the coils, the fangs, the venom—it's enough to give you the heebie-jeebies! When I was a kid, I'd always get freaked out by those news stories about snakes crawling up through pipes into peoples' homes. For years, I checked the toilet bowl every time before I sat down, or if I took a bath I was vigilantly on the lookout for water moccasins. And after seeing that snake pit in Indiana Jones' *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, to this day I think I suffer from PTSD.

And I know I'm not the only one—research has shown that one of our greatest fears as human beings is snakes. So much so, the 1997 horror movie *Anaconda* was a box office smash and became an instant cult classic. Its tag line was, "When you can't breathe you can't scream". And nearly ten years later, somebody got the great idea, *Hey, let's take that and combine it with humanity's other great fear of flying, and it'll be the ultimate horror film!* Thus, in 2006 *Snakes on a Plane* hit theaters across the nation. Its movie poster read, "Sit back. Relax. Enjoy the fright."

And have you ever noticed that all the bad guys are always snakes? Like, in G.I. Joe, it's C.O.B.R.A. And He-Man, it's the Snake Men. And if you're a Captain America fan, then you might remember the Serpent Society—an organization of snake-themed supervillains. There's just something about snakes, isn't there?

So, when we heard about those Israelites this morning, even if they all deserved it, our hearts still went out to them. Like, as if they didn't have enough to worry about wandering around in the desert for forty years—starvation, heatstroke, sandstorms—they have to contend with snakes too. So along come the fiery serpents, slithering their way into tents, sleeping bags, up people's legs. And apparently it got so bad, folks were dropping dead of snakebite, and many others took ill. Can you imagine if we all decided to go on a spiritual retreat, take a church camping trip together, and we found snakes everywhere—falling from the trees, laying on the ground, squirming in our gear, no place to step! There's just something about snakes!

But y'know, I wonder if there's not something more to our fear than the coils, and the fangs, and the venom. I mean, many of us would jump even at a harmless little garter snake wiggling in the grass. And there are so many other animals to be more afraid of, don'tcha think, that are bigger and stronger and way more ferocious. So, could it be that there's more to our fear perhaps, maybe some faint distant memory burned into our subconscious of something that's happened to you and me? Something that, ever since, has made us naturally a little skittish around anything that slithers or hisses? Something that has programmed our automatic default setting to think, *there's just something about snakes?*

I'll never forget the report—it was one of the strangest stories I've ever heard. Just over a year ago, Ashley Glawe, a Portland resident, was one of these people who wears gauges in their ears, y'know stretches them out to fit these big plugs. Well, apparently it was like any other day, she was playing with her pet snake, when it decided to poke its head through one of those big holes in her earlobe. And when this Ball Python—which, by the way, is named Bart—was too big to fit all the way through her lobe, and she was unable to take him out on her own, Ashley realized she had a problem. So, away she went to Portland Adventist Hospital—imagine that drive, a snake dangling from your ear! But thankfully, all it took for the doctors to spring ol' Bart free was some Vaseline and a little stretching. I'm sure we're all relieved to learn no snakes were harmed in the process.

But the reason this story has stuck with me is because it's such a powerful picture of what happened in a garden paradise long, long ago. It's as if that first serpent, hissing into Eve's ear, has gotten himself stuck. And that serpent's small, almost imperceptible voice remained, continuing to plant horrible ideas in her head. And releasing a deadly venom, the serpent's slow-acting poison would eventually corrupt her entire being until her final breath. And ever since, from one generation to the next, he's still inside our heads, and that toxin continues to plague us. You and me, we not only have evil desires in us, but we are absolutely paralyzed when it comes to the good things of God—it's like Paul said in the Epistle: we are "dead in our trespasses and sins." Perhaps having some innate awareness of how things went haywire for us all, has instilled in everyone a natural fear of snakes.

So, how has that snake slithered his way into your life? What's got its coils around you and won't let go—squeezing the life out of you? In what ways have you felt the sharp sting of the serpent's bite? "The wages of sin is death," the Bible says—have you already felt the toxic effects in your body? Trapped in this horrific reality, maybe with the Israelites we're also crying out to God for help—"Lord, take away the serpents from us!"

It's such a strange solution that the Lord gives to Moses, isn't it? I mean, "Make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, will live"? Isn't that the problem to begin with? A serpent? And here God's telling us to make one and look at it? What gives, God?

There's a phenomenon in general psychology called psychological projection—I'm sure many of us are familiar with it. It's when something you see in yourself is what you then see in others. For example, if you define yourself according to body image, then physical physique will always be the first thing you notice about somebody. Or, if you feel guilty about something, then you're bound to judge others harshly who are guilty of that same thing. Or, if you're desperate enough for something to hope in, you might project that need onto somebody who you think can help—even idolizing them as a savior. Could that at all be what God's doing here?

For the Israelites, God gave them an object onto which they could project all their problems—their sin and their snakes—they could see it right there in that bronze serpent. And so desperate for help were they that they could now look for their salvation hanging on that pole. By allowing them to cast off their troubles, remove it from themselves and place it onto this cold, lifeless piece of metal, God showed His people that their nightmare was also over—just as cold and dead as that bronze serpent.

So, that's all fine and good for the Israelites, but what about us? What about you and I who wrestle against Satan, who struggle with sin? Where's our bronze serpent? Jesus tells us in the Gospel today. He says, that just "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so is the Son of Man lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life."

For us—for you and me—the Son of Man is lifted up. Twisted around a cross, Jesus Christ is our bronze serpent on a pole. What are your deepest secrets? What are your darkest desires? What are your most shocking confessions? Project them onto Christ—take what's in you and put it all on Him. See Him now as you've seen yourself.

Luther puts it this way—he says, "Christ took all our sins upon Himself and for them He died on the cross." And bearing such sin, Christ became for us "the greatest thief, murderer, adulterer, robber, desecrator, blasphemer"—whatever horrible image you have of yourself—He became the worst "there has ever been anywhere in the world"—that's what Luther says. So look upon Jesus—ugly as sin—and see how you're not to blame anymore, how those sins are no longer yours. But just like His cold, lifeless body, your past regrets are now dead and gone. If you're desperate for hope, find it in Christ your Savior.

While we're talking about psychological projection, I can't help but wonder how Christ projects. I mean, looking out at us from the cross, how does He see you and me? Well, in this morning's Gospel, He tells us what we look like to Him. In His own words, Jesus says, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." Jesus says, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him." Did you hear His words? "God so loved the world"—God so loves you! That you "should not perish," He says, "but have eternal life"! "God didn't send His Son to condemn the world, but to save it"! Love . . . life . . . salvation! To Jesus, that's what you look like. He projects what's in Him onto you—sees you as He sees Himself.

Still, you and I know it's not all over yet—but this side of heaven that poison still persists. No doubt we will wrestle against the serpent, still struggle with sin. What we need is antivenom. Antivenom stops the effects of a venom's antigens in the bloodstream. And the way antivenom is made is by taking some of the original venom and injecting it into the bloodstream of an animal, which then makes good and strong antibodies that can fight off the venom's antigens. You take that serum from the blood and you then have yourself some antivenom.

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Fourth Sunday in Lent
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

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Well, we all know that Jesus—bearing the sin of the world—got bitten Himself. But today, He supplies us with just the antivenom we need—His true body and blood. He was injected with the antigens so that you'd have His divine antibodies. They're strong enough to fight off the toughest venom, and to keep you alive forever and ever, world without end. Amen. Snakes, Satan, sin—you have nothing to fear anymore. No, in just a few moments, step up here into the office of your Great Physician—He's got a dose for you. The Eucharist is what one church father called "the medicine of immortality." (St. Ignatius of Antioch) Come and get yours.