

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Lent
RCL Lectionary, Year B
March 22nd, 2009

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Strange Portents

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

It has been a strange and difficult week for so many of us, with challenging illness amongst some of our members, the painful and difficult realities of staffing transitions here at Church of Our Saviour, the ongoing economic challenges that have really come home for all of us. . . and, then of course, there's the strange portent in the national press of executive bonuses at AIG, which became over the past several days a lightning rod for all the world's bloodlust over the global downturn.

In the face of such strangeness and difficulty arrive two strange and difficult readings from our scripture readings this morning. The first is a lesser-known passage from the Book of Numbers about Moses hoisting a bronze snake in the wilderness to safeguard the People of God from a plague of snakes. The second is a strange conversation Jesus has with a Pharisee, Nicodemus, who has come to him under cover of darkness to discover what this strange healer and teacher is really all about. And in that conversation about salvation, Jesus points back to this story of Moses and the ancient Israelites, and this strange portent of a serpent lifted high by the great Prophet of old.

Moses' bronze snake, the *Nehushtan*, as it is later described in the Second Book of Kings, holds an ambivalent place in the Hebrew Scriptures and is, as you might well imagine, itself an ambivalent image. The brass rod is a peculiar and even unsettling synthesis of the classical Genesis symbol of deception – the snake – married with a moment of salvation, of divine favor for God's people struggling in the wilderness.

By the reign of the revered King Hezekiah, the *Nehushtan* had become regarded as a cultic talisman – perhaps even an idol – rooted, many scholars believe, in old Canaanite practices. So in an iconoclastic moment in the book of Second Kings, Hezekiah has the *Nehushtan* destroyed. Later Jewish interpretation, like that found in the Talmud, would downplay the *Nehushtan*. Instead the interpretive thrust of today's passage from Numbers would hinge on the ancient Israelites turning their gaze not so much towards a bronze snake, but rather upwards and back to God.

But the fact that Jesus mentions the portent of the bronze snake in today's passage from John shows how important a part the scriptural story the *Nehushtan* continued to play in the hearts and minds of the faithful as late as the first century: a strange portent lifted up to become a talisman for all who gazed its way.

For me, the *Nehushtan* seems in part the embodiment of a primordial human need to elevate the venom and deceptions of our lives - to raise them up high as a focus for all our blame, shame, and guilt. To see, in a strange and twisting portent, all that blights our lives, in the hope that beholding such a sign will externalize our suffering and shame and, perhaps, heal us.

In a way, the visage this week of AIG executives hoisted up on their bonuses could be understood as a twenty-first century *Nehushtan*. Unknown names were suddenly thrust into the media spotlight, death threats were called in, the House of Representatives passed a punitive 90% tax, and we all turned to gaze at the strange portent, perhaps with the hope that we might be healed. . . that the snakebites of this recession might not prove fatal for us. . .that our anger might be justified and we might be redeemed by good old fashioned American notions of fairness.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not here this morning to defend bonuses paid to executives of AIG, nor the merits and weaknesses of contract law when the financial world has flipped upside down. No, I'm here to point out that the flap over AIG, far from a new thing, is actually among the oldest stories in the human family. That the scramble to scapegoat is as ancient as calamity and social crisis. That our desire to cast blame or pain elsewhere – so long as it is outside of us – is an almost instinctive reaction to our own pain and shortcomings. That our seeking after talismans when we suffer collective illnesses, challenges, or even failures, is almost as natural as breathing.

Christ knows this about humanity as he appeals to the image of the *Nehushtan* in reference to his own crucifixion. But Christ wants Nicodemus and us to understand that the world's redemption is not ultimately found in the lifting up of a bronze snake or the bonuses of financiers, or the financiers themselves, but in the elevation of God, the lifting up of all that is good and true, humble and free. . .the lifting up of the incarnation, the union of human and divine.

That the Son of Man must be lifted up just as the serpent was in the wilderness speaks to the healing power of self-offering, the awesome and unsettling power of God – given over to death on a cross, confronting and dying to the terrible bloodlust that often appears in the human family when the chips are down.

We are called this Lent to turn away from the *Nehushtans* of our world – the easy targets and talismans for our ills and sufferings, and instead to the strange portent of God on a cross. To lift our eyes, in this way, up and back to God. To allow our God to confront and even die to our bloodlust and venom, so that it all may come to an end. A God who through this remarkable act at once completes and forever comprehends and lives with us in our worst illnesses, our greatest challenges and shortcomings, and the strange twists and turns of this life in the wilderness.

The cross is the Christian answer to the need for a scapegoat, a strange portent, a healing talisman when the snakes are loose and the People of God suffer. The broken bread and the common cup is the fruit of the cross in our wilderness, the anti-venom of the household of God, the healing offering that binds the human family back together and renews our hope for the renewal that is yet to come. So come, look up and partake, and be set free. ***Amen.***