

## **2009 Global Mission Lenten Series**

### **Week Four Worship Resources**

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*Numbers 21:4-9*

*John 3:14-21*

### **Snakes, Violence, Healing and Salvation**

Do you like snakes? Few people do, and even those who do, are in awe of them. Few people are neutral in relation to them and most have some snake stories in their life. We could have an interesting time sharing these stories here if we wanted. I remember taking a friend's son to the zoo and there we held a huge 15 foot snake together with a large group of visitors at the zoo. Many couldn't even touch the snake and everyone had an emotional reaction to the activity. Some were repulsed; others felt really good about themselves, having conquered their fears. Here in Brazil, the most common reaction to a snake is to try and kill it, mainly out of fear and ignorance. Many are poisonous and some others can crush even large animals. However, in reality, their bad reputation is largely undeserved and they are important in controlling varmints. This fear is not new. We read in the third chapter of the Bible that the snake was especially cursed for tempting Eve. Our text from the book of Numbers is another snake story.

This was one of the many trials that the people of Israel had to face in the desert. They had suffered terribly under slavery in Egypt, but then they got their freedom with God's saving help. Moses led the people out of Egypt and even though Egypt used its vast military might to capture them, they got away. At first there was celebration as, against all odds, they were able to get free of one of the most powerful nations in the world. The Pharaoh of Egypt was defeated and they were saved. God was on their side. Then things got tough. In the end it took forty years of wandering in the desert to reach their new land. In the end, it was only the children of those who left Egypt who were able to enjoy God's promise of a new land. This time, which we call the Exodus, was a time of trial for the people of Israel, and many times they doubted that it was worth it. Can you eat freedom? We were slaves, but had food. In our text, as at other times in this period, the people complained. Here God's patience came to an end, but with the poisonous snakes the people saw that they only had God to depend on. They repented and asked Moses to pray that God would take away the snakes. God didn't do that, but gave another solution. God commanded Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Those who were bit would look upon this bronze snake, and they would be healed. The snake was both the curse and the cure.

How strange a response, but if we think about it, how fitting. Jesus, in the Gospel lesson (John 3:14-21) reminds Nicodemus how God will again do a similar act. "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." (v. 14-15) If we were not so used to the cross, it would seem even stranger than the snake on the pole. The cross is no abstract thought or idea of help. It was one of the cruelest weapons of torturous death devised by human society. It was reserved only for the worst of criminals. Not only was it the death penalty, but "cruel and inhuman treatment", state torture and violence. We, like Nicodemus, are called to look to the cross, to see our salvation, but not only our personal salvation, but the world's salvation. "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."

Our looking to the cross is not just an individual act, for our personal salvation, but a call, as redeemed people of God, to follow the crucified Jesus. Ours is a world of violence and injustice where it is often impossible to say who are the guilty ones and who are the innocent ones. All of us participate in this violence. We, like the people of Israel, bitten by the serpents, must ask for God's mercy and look to God's salvation in the cross.

I wish to share a few images from Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, one of the most beautiful cities in the world, and one of the most violent. In order to hold elections there in October 2008, the government was forced to send in the army to parts of the city. The pictures were not much different from those coming from the city of Baghdad. It is a city where the police are considered some of the most violent in the world, and a city where large sections are controlled by drug traffickers. Police kill and are killed in what more resembles a war zone, than simply poor sections of a large city. Here is a view of one of the largest slums in Latin America (image of the Rocinha neighborhood). It can be compared to the camp of the Israelite people, full of poisonous snakes with blame on all sides.

In July of 1993, the beautiful Candelaria Church in Rio de Janeiro (image) made the international news. About 70 street children (children with no homes) were using the area outside the church as shelter for the night. Someone, or some of the group there, had offended a police officer. There are two main versions. One was that some of these kids were throwing rocks at police cars, and the other that one of the kids had robbed the mother of a policeman. Whatever the reason, shortly after midnight on July 23, 1993, several cars with policemen arrived at the church and opened fire on the children. Eight were killed, six minors (ages 11 to 17) and 2 adults (ages 18 and 19), and several other wounded. That was 1993, but unfortunately the problem of violence has not changed much since then. According to one of the last reports by Human Rights Watch there has been a rise in violence committed by and against the police in Rio. In many cases bystanders get in the way and become victims. Many of the shooting by the police, when investigated, turn out to be summary executions and not the result of confrontation with the police. In Brazil as a whole, around 50,000 persons are murdered each year. These are 2007 statistics.

People are often afraid to go out especially at night, and not just in cities like Rio de Janeiro. In our city, with a population of 200,000, some people have stopped going to church activities at night. More and more houses have high fences or walls with electric fences on top. One hardly knows one's neighbors because no one can see the other. Children who used to ride their bikes to school now are driven, even when it is a few short blocks away. Some are even saying, like the Israelites, wasn't it better being in slavery, that is, wasn't it better under the military dictatorship?

Brazil is not alone in this. The fear and the violence are present also in the United States. And these are only one set of problems that we as human beings face. How do we deal with the insecurities of our lives? How do we deal with sickness? How do we deal with growing older and losing our independence? What about financial insecurity? [I write this meditation with triple digit drops in the stock markets, and talk about world economic turmoil.] Our text talks of the bronze snake which saves the people of Israel in the desert, but it is not the snake that counts in the end. It is God who is our security. Jesus, in his conversation with Nicodemus, shows us

this. In this Lenten season we are reminded to look to the cross of Christ, and there we will find our security, our salvation. We also need to be reminded that, like the Israelites, God doesn't remove all sickness, violence and insecurity in our lives, but God gives us healing, hope and salvation.

The city of Rio de Janeiro also has another tie to these texts. One of the main tourist points, and a symbol of the city, is the statue of Christ the Redeemer (image). Here is a statue of Jesus with his arms outstretched reminding us of the cross, but also with hands open in welcome ready to embrace the people of the city. One of the most important gestures that Brazilians use is the embrace. This is how you greet a friend, a member of the family. The normal way to end a friendly letter or e-mail is “abraços”, “hugs”. The exchange of peace is most often an embrace and not a handshake. This statue is not only a tourist point, it is a sign of hope and faith for the people of Brazil. This faith is often strongest amongst the poorest of the population, those who suffer the most with the violence, the neglect, those who would have the least reason for hope. As Jesus found his greatest support among the outcasts of his time, it is so often among the simple, the poor, the suffering and the children that we can find the strongest testimony of faith in God's love.

To look to Christ and his cross is not only our comfort, but also our mission. Like Moses, we are called to walk and pray with and for those who suffer. We are called to give witness to that salvation that we have received. We are called to work for a world where there is more justice, more peace, more solidarity between people and peoples (ethnic groups and nations). We do this because most often the love of Christ comes to us through others. God's Spirit present in the lives and actions of God's people around us has brought us to Christ, and therefore our mission is to share God's embrace, God's salvation with those around us.

In times of pain and adversity, in times of joy and celebration, let us look to that violent cross of Christ which is our hope and salvation, and pray for the healing of our world. Let us do that now as we once again sing the kyrie, “For the troubles and the sufferings of this world.”