

DATE: MARCH 22, 2015
SCRIPTURES: NUMBERS 21:4-9; JOHN 12:20-33
TITLE: SNAKE ON A STICK/LOOK AND SEE

WITHOUT A DOUBT, THE SNAKE ON A STICK PASSAGE
IS ONE OF THE MOST CURIOUS IN THE BIBLE.
FIRST, GOD SENDS SNAKES TO BITE AND KILL
THE VERY PEOPLE GOD HAS RESCUED FROM SLAVERY IN EGYPT.
THEN, GOD INSTRUCTS MOSES TO FASHION A SNAKE ON A STICK
AND TELL THE PEOPLE TO LOOK AT THE SNAKE
IF THEY ARE BITTEN.
BY LOOKING AT THE SNAKE,
THEY WILL BE SAVED.
WE DON'T KNOW WHAT TO MAKE OF THIS VERY CURIOUS STORY.
IS IT A RECASTING OF AN ANCIENT MYTH
THAT SOMEHOW MADE ITS WAY INTO HOLY SCRIPTURE?
IS IT AN EXAMPLE OF THE MAGICAL THINKING
OF A MORE PRIMITIVE PEOPLE?
OR IS POINTING US TO A DEEP TRUTH
ABOUT WHO WE ARE AND WHO GOD IS?
IF THIS LAST POSSIBILITY IS TRUE,
THEN WE DARE NOT DISCOUNT THE STORY
OR RELEGATE IT TO THE DUSTBIN.

THE ISRAELITES WANDER IN THE WILDERNESS
AFTER THEY LEAVE EGYPT.
AND THEY WANDER AND,
THEY WANDER SOME MORE,
AND EVENTUALLY THEY GET SICK OF IT.
MOST OF THAT TIME, THEY GRUMBLE,
COMPLAIN BITTERLY,
ABOUT THE LACK OF FOOD,
THE LACK OF WATER,
THE HEAT, THE COLD,
THE SAND, THE INCESSANT WALKING.
THEY ARE FREE AT LAST,
FREE FROM PHARAOH
AND THE DEHUMANIZING, DEMEANING, DEMORALIZING LIFE
THEY WERE LIVING IN EGYPT.
BUT, OUT THERE IN THE WILDERNESS, MILES FROM EGYPT,
THEY BEGIN TO REALIZE
THAT FREEDOM ALSO BRINGS
UNCERTAINTY, RISK, EVEN DANGER.
AS THAT REALIZATION BUBBLES UP,
THEY BEGIN TO YEARN FOR THE CREATURE COMFORTS OF EGYPT

THAT YEARNING MANIFESTS ITSELF AS INCESSANT COMPLAINING
ABOUT MOSES' DECISIONS.

SOMETIMES, THE DEVIL YOU KNOW SEEMS PREFERABLE
TO THE DEVIL YOU DON'T KNOW.

THE ISRAELITES TAKE UP THEIR COMPLAINING YET AGAIN
AS TRAVEL AROUND EDOM.

BUT, THIS TIME IT'S DIFFERENT.

IT'S DIFFERENT, BECAUSE THEY DON'T JUST GRUMBLE AGAINST MOSES.

THEY ALSO GRUMBLE AGAINST GOD.

FILLED WITH ANXIETY, FEAR, ANGER AND RESENTMENT,
THEIR WORDS COME SPILLING OUT,

“YOU NEVER COME,
YOU NEVER CALL.”

LIKE WATER FLOODING OVER A DAM,
THEY DON'T THINK ABOUT

OR CARE ABOUT WHAT THEY ARE SAYING.

FIRST, THEY ACCUSE GOD AND MOSES OF PLOTTING THEIR DEATHS.

THEN, THEY COMPLAIN ABOUT HAVING NO FOOD OR WATER.

FINALLY, THEY COMPLAIN THE POOR QUALITY OF THE FOOD.

IN ONE BREATH THEY SAY THEY HAVE NO FOOD;

IN THE NEXT, THEY COMPLAIN THE FOOD.

IT WOULD BE COMICAL,

IF THEY WERE AIMING AT COMEDY.

BUT, THEY AREN'T.

THEY ARE DEAD SERIOUS,

AND WHAT THEY ARE SAYING IS DEADLY,

THE ISRAELITES ACTIONS ARE DEADLY

BECAUSE THEY ARE SCAPEGOATING GOD AND MOSES.

SCAPEGOATING IS AN ALL TOO COMMON HUMAN RESPONSE

TO ANXIETY, FEAR, ANGER, FRUSTRATION.

IT'S THE PRACTICE OF BLAMING

SOMEONE ELSE OR A PARTICULAR GROUP FOR OUR PROBLEMS.

IN EXTREME CASES OF SCAPEGOATING,

AN INDIVIDUAL OR A GROUP

EXPELS, EVEN KILLS, THE ONES BEING SCAPEGOATED.

THIS IS WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE JEWS REPEATEDLY
THROUGHOUT HISTORY.

IT IS WHAT HAS HAPPENED AND CONTINUES TO HAPPEN
TO AFRICAN AMERICANS AND HISPANICS

HERE IN THE UNITED STATES.

IT IS WHAT IS HAPPENING TO MUSLIMS

IN MANY PARTS OF THE WORLD TODAY.

IN ADDITION TO WOUNDING
OR KILLING THE PEOPLE BEING SCAPEGOATED,
SCAPEGOATING CAN AND DOES HAVE TERRIBLE CONSEQUENCES
FOR THE PEOPLE DOING THE SCAPEGOATING.
IT PREVENTS THEM FROM UNDERSTANDING
WHAT IS FEEDING THEIR NEED TO SCAPEGOAT OTHERS
IT MAKES IT DIFFICULT FOR THEM TO DEVELOP
A SENSITIVITY TO AND ACCEPTANCE OF PEOPLE
DIFFERENT FROM THEMSELVES.
IT PROMOTES DISTRUST AMONG PEOPLE AND GROUPS OF PEOPLE.
IN A WORD, SCAPEGOATING IS ODIOUS.
ODIOUS BECAUSE IT DEMEANS AND DEHUMANIZES
EVERYONE INVOLVED.
MUCH LIKE THE SNAKE IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN,
SCAPEGOATING IS A SNAKE THAT KILLS.

THE TRUTH THIS CURIOUS STORY TELLS
IS PEOPLE DIE FROM SNAKEBITES
THEY DIE WHETHER THE BITE COMES FROM A POISONOUS SNAKE
OR FROM THE POISON OF SCAPEGOATING.
ONE KILLS THE BODY;
THE OTHER KILLS THE SPIRIT.
BOTH DESTROY COMMUNITY
AMONG PEOPLE AND BETWEEN GROUPS OF PEOPLE.

WHEN GOD TELLS MOSES TO PUT A SNAKE ON A STICK
AND HAVE ALL SNAKE-BITTEN PEOPLE LOOK AT IT,
GOD PROVIDES THE PEOPLE A WAY TO LIVE.
GOD SAYS,
“LOOK!
LOOK AT WHAT YOU HAVE DONE.
LOOK AT HOW YOU HAVE SINNED.
GOD SAYS,
“LOOK AND REPENT!
LOOK AND TURN AWAY FROM YOUR SIN.
LOOK AND TRUST ME AND MOSES ONCE MORE.”
GOD SAYS,
“LOOK AND BE REMINDED
THAT DISTRUST AND SCAPEGOATING KILL!
LOOK AND SEE HOW IT KILLS RELATIONSHIPS.
LOOK AND DISCERN HOW IT IS FATAL TO YOU.”
THE SNAKE ON A STICK IS NOT AN IDOL TO BE WORSHIPPED.
IT IS NOT SOME MYTHOLOGICAL STORY
THAT SOMEHOW CREPT INTO THE BIBLE.
IT IS NOT AN EXAMPLE OF THE MAGICAL THINKING

OF A MORE PRIMITIVE PEOPLE.
RATHER, IT IS A REMINDER OF GOD'S FAITHFULNESS AND LOVE
AND OUR NEED FOR FORGIVENESS.
AS SUCH, IT IS AN ICON,
SOMETHING THAT HELPS US PERCEIVE
A DEEP TRUTH ABOUT GOD AND OURSELVES.

PERHAPS, YOU FOLLOWED THE STORY OF THE MEMBERS
OF THE SIGMA ALPHA EPSILON FRATERNITY AT OU,
WHO SANG A RACIAL CHANT
WHILE BEING TRANSPORTED
TO A FANCY, BLACK-TIE EVENT.

THE CHANT WAS CAUGHT ON VIDEO.
THE VIDEO WENT VIRAL.
THE PUBLIC RAISED A HUE AND CRY.
QUICKLY, OU'S PRESIDENT EXPELLED
THE TWO STUDENTS LEADING THE CHANT
AND CLOSED THE FRAT HOUSE.
ALL OF THIS HAPPENED IN A MATTER OF DAYS, FOUR TO BE EXACT.

PERHAPS, YOU THINK THE PRESIDENT ACTED APPROPRIATELY.
WITHOUT A DOUBT, THE STUDENTS' ACTIONS WERE REPREHENSIBLE.
THE STUDENTS' ACTIONS DID DEMAND A RESPONSE
COMMENSURATE WITH WHAT THEY DID.
BUT, AS MANY POINTED OUT IN THE DAYS AFTER THE INCIDENT,
EXPELLING THE STUDENTS AND CLOSING THE FRAT HOUSE
VIOLATED THE FIRST AMENDMENT RIGHTS
OF THOSE INVOLVED.

THAT ALONE IS A COMPELLING REASON TO RECONSIDER
THE DECISION OU'S PRESIDENT MADE.
IN MY MIND, THERE IS A MORE COMPELLING REASON
HIS DECISION NEEDS TO BE RECONSIDERED.
THERE HAS BEEN AND CONTINUES TO BE MUCH
PREJUDICE, ANXIETY, FEAR, ANGER AND RESENTMENT
AROUND RACIAL ISSUES IN THIS COUNTRY.
YET, THE PRESIDENT'S RESPONSE DOES NOT ADDRESS
ANY OF THESE PROBLEMS.
IT DOES NOTHING EXCEPT KICK THE PROBLEM DOWN THE ROAD.
IT DOES THIS BY SCAPEGOATING THE TWO STUDENTS,
WHO WERE IN TURN SCAPEGOATING AFRICAN AMERICANS.
IT LAYS OUR ANXIETY, FEAR, ANGER, RESENTMENT ON THE STUDENTS
AND SENDS THEM AWAY,
WHICH ALLOWS US TO BREATHE
A COLLECTIVE SIGH OF RELIEF.

WE DON'T HAVE TO THINK ABOUT THE PROBLEM ANYMORE,
AT LEAST NOT FOR A LITTLE WHILE.

TOM PALAIMA, A CLASSICS PROFESSOR AT THE UT, AUSTIN,
PROPOSES ANOTHER SOLUTION IN AN EDITORIAL
THAT APPEARED IN *THE AMERICAN STATESMAN*
A WEEK AGO THIS PAST FRIDAY (3.13.15).

HE ASKS,

“SHOULDN'T WE PONDER
WHAT KIND OF UPBRINGING AND EDUCATION
DISPOSE YOUNG WHITE MEN
AT RESPECTED PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES NOT
TO RECOGNIZE WHEN THEY ARE BEING
RACISTS?
IF WE DISAPPEAR THEM,
ARE WE IN SOME WAYS,
GIVING THEM AND US AN EASY OUT?
ARE WE FAILING TO TAKE HOLD OF AN OPPORTUNITY
TO UNITE IN LEARNING?”

HE ANSWERS HIS QUESTIONS WITH THE SUGGESTION,

“YOUNG MEN WITH RACISTS INSTINCTS,
ESPECIALLY IF ACQUIRED UNTHINKINGLY,
SHOULD HAVE TO CONFRONT
HOW WHAT THEY HAVE DONE AFFECTS THOSE
WHO ARE THE OBJECTS OF THEIR RACISM.
AND THOSE, WHO ARE THE OBJECTS, WOULD BENEFIT
FROM HAVING TO CONFRONT
THEIR OWN FEELINGS OF ANGER OR DESPAIR
ABOUT HOW INGRAINED RACISM
STILL IS IN OUR SOCIETY....”

TO THAT END, PALAIMA THINKS THE STUDENTS
SHOULD HAVE HAD TO REMAIN IN SCHOOL
AND EXPLORE HOW THEIR ACTIONS
IMPACT OTHERS, THE COMMUNITY, AND THEMSELVES.

LOOKING AT THE SNAKE ON A STICK,
BECOMING AWARE OF THE IMPACT OF OUR WORDS AND ACTIONS,
CAN HEAL US AND HEAL OUR COMMUNITIES.

IT CAN OPEN OUR MINDS AND TRANSFORM OUR THINKING.

SOME HUMAN RESPONSES ARE DEEPLY INGRAINED IN US.
SCAPEGOATING, PLAYING THE BLAME GAME,
IS ONE OF THEM.

IN CHRIST, GOD OPENS THE DOOR
TO A NEW WAY, A BETTER WAY, A DIFFERENT WAY
OF BEING IN THE WORLD.

JESUS ACKNOWLEDGES THIS

WHEN HE SAYS,

“BUT, I, WHEN I AM LIFTED UP FROM THE EARTH
WILL DRAW ALL PEOPLE TO MYSELF.” (JOHN 12:32).

EVERY INVOLVED IN JESUS’ CRUCIFIXION IS SCAPEGOATING.

PONTIUS PILATE IS CAUGHT

BETWEEN THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND ROME.

THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS ARE CAUGHT

BETWEEN THEIR ROMAN OVERSEERS AND THE PEOPLE.

THE PEOPLE ARE CAUGHT

BETWEEN THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS
AND THEIR DESIRE FOR RELIEF.

PILATE’S ACTIONS SAY,

“I WASH MY HANDS OF THIS AFFAIR.” (MATTHEW 27:).

THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS SAY,

“IT IS BETTER FOR ONE MAN TO DIE FOR THE PEOPLE T
THAN THAT THE WHOLE NATION PERISH. (JOHN 11:50).

THE PEOPLE SAY,

“CRUCIFY HIM! CRUCIFY HIM!”

ALL OF THEM LAY

THEIR ANXIETIES, FEARS, ANGER, FRUSTRATION ON JESUS.

ALL OF THEM SCAPEGOAT JESUS.

FIRST, THEY SCAPEGOAT JESUS;

THEN, THEY CRUCIFY HIM.

THROUGH THAT TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, AGONIZING, BRUTAL ACT

GOD REWRITES THE WORLD’S STORY AND OUR STORY.

ON THE CROSS, GOD IN CHRIST SHOWS US IN WORD AND DEED

A BETTER WAY,

A RIGHTEOUS WAY,

A MORE COMPASSIONATE WAY TO LIVE.

CENTRAL TO THIS BETTER WAY IS

TRUST IN GOD AND LOVE FOR OTHERS.

TRUST IN GOD AND LOVE FOR OTHERS

CAN OVERCOME OUR MOST BASIC INSTINCT,

THE INSTINCT TO PROTECT OURSELVES AT ALL COST.

TRUST AND LOVE CAN OPEN THE WAY

TO A NEW WAY OF THINKING,

A NEW WAY OF BEING,

A NEW WAY OF LIVING.

GOD GIVES US THE CROSS

THAT WE MIGHT LOOK AND SEE

AND SEEING MIGHT DISCERN THE VERY HEART OF GOD,

THE HOME OF ETERNAL LOVE. AMEN.

