

Acts 28:1-10

Outward Church: A Great Big Snake Story (David & Goliath the Serpent)

Rev. Jonathan M. Romig / March 6th, 2022

Elijah really likes *The Jungle Book*. One of the characters in that story is a really big and sneaky snake named Kaa. He's a python, and he's famous for his colorful, hypnotic eyes and his ability to put Mowgli into a trance. He nearly catches and eats Mowgli, but Mowgli escapes. Snakes are a part of popular culture, from *Indiana Jones* to *Harry Potter* to the movie, *Anaconda*, and *Snakes on a Plane* (neither of which I've seen). But, our love (or hate) of snakes didn't start there.

Today, I want to tell you a great big snake story. Some of you may hate snakes, so I'm not going to show any pictures of snakes today. But I hope you'll agree that scripture tells the story of God, of humanity, and of a deceptive serpent-like creature, and it starts all the way back in Genesis 3.

Genesis 3:1 (NIV)

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

Here the serpent, Satan embodied, tempts Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which God has forbidden. This divine being was not always Satan, God's archenemy, but had at one time been an angel who, for unknown reasons, rebelled against God and fell into sin (Ezekiel 28:12-18). Now he tempts humankind to rebel against God, and he's successful. Adam and Eve eat, disobey, and fall into a similar state of sin. But unlike the serpent, God will redeem their state. God curses the serpent this way:

Genesis 3:13b-15 (NIV)

¹³ . . . The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

¹⁴ So the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this,

"Cursed are you above all livestock
and all wild animals!

You will crawl on your belly
and you will eat dust
all the days of your life.

¹⁵ And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel."

So God curses the serpent two ways. First, God condemns the snake to crawl on his belly and eat dust for all his life. But wait, don't snakes already crawl on their bellies? Did this one have legs? No. Dust is symbolic of death (Adam was made from dust, and to dust, he would return), and dust is symbolic of defeat (Genesis 2:7; 3:19). The prophet Isaiah promises this about God's final victory over the serpent.

Isaiah 65:25 (NIV)

The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,

and dust will be the serpent's food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,"
says the Lord.

God promises Satan's endless defeat (c.f., Isaiah 27:1). Satan will be destroyed. The second half of the curse in Genesis 3:15 promises one of Eve's descendants will strike the serpent's head even though the serpent will strike his heel. Jesus was wounded at the cross, yet crushed the serpent's head, defeating Satan.

As we go through the story of the Bible, snakes appear not only in Genesis but in Exodus among Pharaoh's magicians (Exodus 7:10-12). Aaron throws down his staff, which becomes a serpent, and eats Pharaoh's magicians' snakes. Snakes aren't always bad. In fact, in Numbers, when the people have disobeyed God and are being cursed with snake bites, Moses erects a bronze serpent on a pole, which the people only have to look at to be healed (Numbers 21:7-9).

In John's gospel, Moses' lifted-up serpent becomes an image of Jesus being lifted up on the cross (John 3:14-15). Unfortunately, the bronze serpent also becomes an object of worship and idolatry over time (2 Kings 18:4). I don't know why the Bible holds these two images in tension. Does the serpent represent Christ, or perhaps it's meant to show us that one day, at the cross, Jesus will crucify the serpent's power?

And we find this story whispered throughout Scripture. Another story Elijah loves is the story of David and Goliath. But that's not a snake story, is it? In 1 Samuel 17, the Philistines gather to war against Israel. The Philistines are on one hill and the Israelites on the other, but the Philistines send out their champion Goliath to fight. Goliath is a giant who wears bronze armor, a little like Moses' serpent. Goliath is a serpent figure.

The Hebrew word for bronze is similar to that of serpent. But in 1 Samuel 17, the Hebrew uses an unusual word to describe Goliath's "scale armor" (1 Samuel 17:5). What other animals have scales? Fish, reptiles, snakes. This scale imagery is reptilian, snakelike. When David volunteers to fight Goliath, what does King Saul do? He tries to fit him with a bronze helmet and armor, but David won't fight like Goliath fights. David doesn't trust in the power or might of the serpent but in God.

1 Samuel 17:45-46, 49 (NIV)

⁴⁵ David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. ⁴⁶ This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. . . .⁴⁹ Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground.

And what does David do? He does just that. Using a sling and five smooth stones, he sinks one into Goliath's forehead, and he cuts off his head with a sword (1 Samuel 17:48-51). The descent of Eve has fought a serpent-like creature and won, striking his head with a mortal blow. This sounds like Genesis 3, doesn't it? What does Goliath eat? It says, "he fell facedown on the ground." Goliath eats dust! The serpent eats dust!

And the best part is that David doesn't do it in his own strength, but "in the name of the Lord Almighty." David and Goliath pre-enact (enact beforehand) that ultimately triumph the one who bears the Lord Almighty's name, Yahweh saves, Yeshua, Jesus, will enact at the cross. The serpent will be defeated. Goliath tempts Israel to give up their allegiance to God just like the serpent tempted Adam and Eve and just like the choice you and I have to make as well. Will we stand with Goliath, the serpent, and his armor of bronze? Or will we stand with David and with Jesus, exposed, vulnerable, but trusting in God?

One of the illustrations I remember Pastor Dana Smith, when he was at Immanuel Church, using was that of a giant headless serpent to describe Satan. Christ has come and removed Satan's head, but the serpent's body

still wriggles and thrashes, causing destruction. When the teachers of the law accused Jesus of being possessed by “Beelzebul,” being in league with the devil himself, Jesus told the story of binding the strong man before plundering his house (Mark 3:26-27). Jesus isn’t working for Satan but has bound him.

But aren’t we in the book of Acts? What does this have to do with the Apostle Paul getting shipwrecked on the tiny island of Malta? There’s always a risk of reading theology under every rock or reading too much into it. But you know what, I’m going to go for it because I don’t feel like preaching a sermon about why we shouldn’t handle snakes in church services. Just don’t do it! It’s bad! We know the historian Luke included true events, but it’s interesting he chose to highlight this one. So here’s what happens.

Paul and his crew are shipwrecked and wash up on the shore. The local villagers (the Maltese?) build them a fire, and like every good survivor, Paul helps gather wood. But as he does so, he grabs a snake because he thinks it’s a stick, and when he goes to throw it into the fire, it bites his hand. I imagine it was painful, as it was there long enough to hang on. I’ve gotten bitten by a dog and by a goldfish, and neither was pleasant. I can’t imagine a viper with fangs. But Paul shakes it off into the fire (Acts 28:1-5).

And, of course, the villagers expect Paul to die. This must be God’s judgment on someone to escape the sea and then get bitten by a snake. That’s a very human perspective on God’s judgment. Bad things happen to bad people, right? And in a world ruled by the serpent, in a world ruled by the scale-bronze-armor-clad Goliath, in a world ruled by the strong man, that’s true. But the great big story of Acts is God’s story in microcosm. The gospel has shot out from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and almost to Rome. The gospel has crossed social and ethnic barriers to reach the Jews and Gentiles. And here, at last, Paul foreshadows God’s coming judgment on the serpent himself. He will be defeated; he will be cast into the fire.

Just like the first book in the Bible, Genesis, starts with a battle between God’s people and the serpent, the last book of the Bible ends the same. Revelation talks about an enormous red dragon, the ancient serpent:

Revelation 12:9 (NIV)

The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

With Revelation, it’s always difficult to know if this is talking about a past event, a future event, or both. But here’s what we know. Jesus has defeated the serpent at the cross and will one day defeat the serpent for good. We find this near the end of Revelation.

Revelation 20:10 (NIV)

And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

It’s going to end poorly for the serpent, and he is terrified. So when Paul was bit yet shook off the snake into the fire, if nothing else, it was symbolic of Satan’s ultimate defeat. And what happens after this? Paul goes and heals the sick on the island of Malta. The curse is being undone. And as we look at the great big story of the snake and the great big story of God redeeming the world, we see that Jesus has defeated the serpent and will one day vanquish him forever. Let’s pray.

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church in Westford, MA. You can listen to his other sermons at CornerstoneWestford.com.

Service & Sermon

You can watch the full service on Facebook or only the sermon on YouTube (see website).

Discussion Time

Group facilitators lead through the discussion time and will pick and choose which questions to use.

Ice-Breaker – What’s your name and favorite animal?

Emotion – What scares you and what brings you joy?

Backward - How did trusting the pilot go this week? (Callback to last week’s sermon)

Upward – What about the great-big story of the snake surprises you? How does it shape your understanding of the gospel?

Inward – The serpent is the accuser. Do you wrestle with feeling condemned? How might the gospel relieve you of that hurt? How does Jesus crushing the serpent’s head apply?

Outward – Like Kaa in *The Jungle Book*, who in your life has the serpent hypnotized? What would it look like to commit to praying for them regularly?

Recap – What’s your one-sentence takeaway from today? Ask one volunteer from the group to share their recap in the sanctuary during the debrief.

Follow-Up

Dear Church,

Thanks for listening to this past Sunday’s sermon. You can find this past Sunday’s message and other weeks in our [Sermon Archive](#). Did you know we have manuscripts, slides, and videos for many of our messages? Thanks for checking out the resources below. I hope they help you follow Christ this week.

- Pastor Jonathan

Spiritual Exercises

Reflect – What does the great big story of the snake stir up in your heart? Take time to pause, listen, and reflect. Ask the Holy Spirit to speak in the quiet of your heart.

Worship – I actually do know of a worship song that sings of the serpent’s defeat. Listen to “Rise Up” by Andrew Peterson. YouTube: <https://youtu.be/B5NSGyDXEjs>

Content Curation

Movie Night – Watch a pop-culture movie about snakes. How does their presentation of snakes line up or contrast with scripture’s story? How might you see culture through the lens of Christ?

Article – Read “A Diet of Dust” to better understand the curse placed on the serpent. <http://redeembible.org/insights/2020/3/19/a-diet-of-dust>

Sermon Slides