



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## **Of Snakes and Lent**

**By The Rev. Sharon Gracen**

**March 9, 2014**

This morning, we have the opportunity to spend some time with one of the truly compelling figures of the Bible - the serpent in the Garden. It is part of a story that never fails to raise lots of questions for me. First a really big one - what was the purpose of creating these human beings? Were they intended to be kept as perfectly innocent children put in the Garden to look after the livestock? That seems like a pretty low expectation from us. And what do we do with that uncomfortable moment in which God appears to tell a big whopper - "If you eat that, you will die!"? It has confounded scholars and seekers for a long time. What does it say about how we understand God? These big questions and the presence of the talking animal make it pretty clear that we are dealing with a mythic story, not a history report, so it's good to understand how a myth like this functions.

The purpose of myths is to explain why things are the way they are. The sun rises in the east, flies overhead and then sets in the west. What makes that happen? Perhaps it is a golden chariot driven by a god. That works. Why is part of the year warm and part cold - well, perhaps some evil deity kidnaps the beautiful summer girl, and keeps her prisoner for several months every year. Of course!

Life in Biblical times was hard, hard to survive, find enough food, hard to make a living. People might wonder why it was like that. Well, we must have angered someone or done something wrong somewhere along the line, and now we are paying for it. This story explains that exactly. Myths not only explain things but they support cultural assumptions, particularly creation myths. These stories explain origins and order; usually who or what has power. In most cultures, the male is supreme, or at least seemingly first. We certainly see this in our story. The woman is the weaker, more easily corruptible. And what power these stories have. So let's pull this one apart to see what's going on here.

Let's start with the snake, probably the only character to be more misinterpreted than Mary Magdalene. For an awful lot of people, if you ask them, they will tell you that the snake is Satan - the great Tempter. Except, that's not what it says here! The serpent is one of God's creatures, all of whom have been deemed to be good. Therefore, the snake must also be good, just cleverer than most. But his reputation takes a major hit after this and he is cast as an enemy of humankind. Why is that? Well, another thing that myths do is sometimes to make distinctions between one culture or belief system and another. And a way of doing that is to

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cast the strengths of your enemies in a bad light. Even the most cursory research will yield a trove of information about snakes and serpents as figures of divinity throughout the world. If not divine themselves, they are associated with gods and more often goddesses. They are part of headgear, worn around the neck or often held aloft. The serpent is associated with wisdom or seen at its guardian. They feature heavily in most of the religions of the Ancient Near East, including Babylon. Once freed from slavery in Babylon, the Jewish people fashioned some of their creation stories in such a way that denied or ignored the Babylonian pantheon of god and in the case of the snake, they turned it into the bad guy. It is mythic one-upmanship. Our god is stronger than your god. Your god is now despised.

But if we look at this story with a more nuanced eye, we might see some other things going on here. As I mentioned before, it begs the question, why would a powerful creator make humankind in the divine image and then imprison them in infancy? What would be the point in that? Why would they be kept from the knowledge of good and evil and able to make choices that reflect that knowledge? Kind of curious. Such a powerful God, this divine parent, is surely wise enough to know that you don't put a plate of cookies on the kitchen counter, tell your six year old not to eat any of them and then leave the room for any amount of time, and expect all of the cookies to still be there when you come back. That's Intro to Parenting stuff. So, I think that Eve and Adam were set up. How else could they ever learn how to live into the image of the God in which they were made? The snake is a necessary agent of their expulsion from protected innocence and out into their journey of existence and spiritual growth. Here the snake was a gateway to wisdom and knowledge and it also provides a powerful metaphor for spiritual journey. Remember that snakes shed their skin when the old one is outgrown. Adam and Eve are forced to shed the skin of infancy and begin to figure things out on their own, to use that knowledge that they had taken for themselves.

Two of the great minds of recent history have had very interesting things to say about the snake. Carl Jung wrote about the snake as a symbol of transcendence and the dangerous possibility of connecting to the wisdom of the collective unconscious. Joseph Campbell wrote in his book, *The Power of Myth*, that "the snake is the symbol of life throwing off the past and continuing to live." Perhaps we are ready to embrace a different understanding of the story of the Garden, I certainly think that we would benefit from a different myth. Instead of being thrown out by an angry parent, what if we heard in this story the tension around the necessary time when all children leave the nest. Once out in the world, parents can no longer control every action, as if they ever could. Free will is a scary thing for those facing it for the first time and for the parents who understand the pitfalls and stumbling blocks. Can it be any easier for a divine parent to see us make mistake after mistake? But when did we ever learn from someone else's?

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Professor Harvey Cox retired as Harvard Professor of Divinity in 2009 after a long career. One of his books was a little gem called *On Not Leaving it to the Snake* in which he argued that the real sin in the Garden was not pride or disobedience but sloth. He insisted that Adam and Eve missed their opportunity to take responsibility for their own growth and decisions, and instead blamed each other and the snake. For human spiritual and moral development to proceed, we must acknowledge our capacity to shape our world and that we are responsible for our decisions or lack thereof. Doing nothing is a much a decision as decisive action. Cox encourages Christians not to settle for the easy out default position of doing nothing and allowing external forces to make our decisions.

So this snake turns out to be a fairly important idea. From the beginning it was a handy scape goat - or scape snake. In the Bible, it serves as a political statement thrown up in the faces of former oppressors or neighboring empires. The snake is a doorkeeper to greater consciousness. It is a symbol of transformative spiritual growth, encouraging us to shed old skins and be made new. It is the agent of the beginning of the next stage of a journey. The Greek word for church is *ecclesia* - which means to be called out, those called out of an old way of being. That's what the snake did for Eve, who in turn did it for Adam.

This holy time of Lent is meant to be a period of self-reflection and renewal, of connecting on a deeper level. And now we have this unlikely companion; that quiet voice or feeling that you might just try something new, something a little bit bold, a step off of your ordinary path and have the courage to say, "I did it; I ate the apple." Let's make a new myth and see where it takes us this season of Lent.

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