My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Eternal God of our Lenten bodies, minds, hearts and spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight. Our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

I’m glad that the Center for Disease Control came out this week with some gentle guidance for gathering together. And I’m equally glad that Governor Chris Sununu has announced that here in New Hampshire we should have enough vaccine available for everyone to get a COVID-19 shot by the end of May. And beyond getting excited about just seeing friends and neighbors again in person, there is also hope that we can again go to the movies. And when I was a young man, I was a big fan of Samuel L. Jackson, you know, the guy who does the CapitalOne credit card commercials that seem to be on every channel, saying, “what’s in your wallet?”. Jackson first came into my consciousness when he played a tough guy in “Pulp Fiction”, and I am brought back to him in this week’s scripture. In 2006, he played an FBI agent escorting a witness on a flight from Honolulu to LA to testify against a mob boss. And the bad guys wanted to kill the witness. So they released some snakes to bite and kill him.

The name of the movie, fittingly, is, “Snakes on a Plane”. It seems preposterous, doesn’t it, and it’s sure not great cinema. But there is definitely a fear factor seeing all those poisonous squirming snakes. And this reminded me of our scripture today as the snakes came to get the ancient Israelites, who could only be saved by “Snakes on a Pole”.

Now, like most things in the Bible’s ancient pre-history that we call the Pentateuch, I don’t think this is meant to be taken literally. These stories are allegories, which are stories in which a character, place, or event is used to deliver a broader message about real-world issues and occurrences.

If we examine the events in the previous chapter of Numbers 20 we discover that the people’s complaining in our scripture today is nothing new. Ever since the people of Israel left Egypt to follow Moses, they have been longing for what they remembered as the necessities of their old lives. Despite being slaves, they remembered they had food and water at their beck and call. They remembered although they sought freedom from bondage, they could find always find fault, and they did. They did NOT remember the promises of God. They remembered their own insatiable wants. They did not remember God’s covenants as they were intended.

We’re in the middle of a sermon series on covenants. Remember those? The covenant of Adam to care for all that is here. The covenant of Noah that no more will the earth be destroyed by flood. Of Abraham that the people will multiply over all the earth and become a great nation. And of Moses and the covenant that they are God’s chosen people, and they have laws that God proscribes to exist in infinite grace with God and one another. The people forgot that God had made all these promises without asking anything of them other than to trust that all this is true, even when they are fearful and unsure. And they still complain that they want to go back and be unsure slaves who are un-free.

God’s response is to give a sign to remember all that has been given and is still true. Snakes, the cursed serpents, are sent to ask, yet again, what shall we do? Save us! And so they are told to look at the serpents amongst them. Not the ones in the world which are biting them. But the bronze one. The one which is given to them so that they can look and see. See that they cannot possibly escape getting bitten as they go along; the world is a tough place and offers no salvation on its own. They are forced to look at the serpent on the pole as a way to look at themselves, to ask what is truly needed. Do they want to return to how things were? Or do they want to see how things might be, if only they could come, in faith, to face their own serpents, and in doing so, no longer be subject to the spiritual death of giving into fears, but instead look to God for all things already promised?

We do this a lot. We complain just like they did, of what is missing in our lives, and we try to control the outcomes of our lives in amazingly destructive ways. By seeking our own solace first. If only I am OK, we tell ourselves, then and only then will I believe in the rest of God’s Great Story.

Covenant love is offered to all of us, never just one individual even if that person is Noah, Abraham, or Moses. We are too pre-occupied to save ourselves to the exclusion of all else, and the results are disastrous. When we see only ourselves, we are left fragile, defensive, adrift, alone, in an ocean of others also trying to save themselves. And we are neither assisting or relying on each other or the whole Body of Christ. Everyone looks at the world through their own little lens, comprised of our family backgrounds, life experiences, and our own temperments. And this lens is a powerful one for us here in America, a self-reliance that we can pull ourselves up, and we bring that lens to every contemplation.

God knows this. And so Jesus appears on the scene speaking of the Kingdom of God, the fullness of time, that is right here, right now. Jesus also brings this allegory full circle, saying that just as the snake was raised up, so must he be raised up. And even a learned, wise man like Nocodemus gets a little jammed up. Because instead of getting clarity to his questions, he’s confused. What we expect as being given access to see through a clear stream to all that is in the water of life has been stirred, and it’s not clear at all, it’s muddy and we can’t see a thing.

Let’s be clear: following Jesus leads to contradictions, questions, and confusion long before we start to see the clear waters. And that’s because of how we’re trained to think; if only we could have that one bit of insight, that one formula, the one that solves the equation to not only make things clear but for us to be certain that we’re right and that we will have the food we want, all the water at our behest. The ancient Israelites, like us, want certainty from God before they will accept faith of following and the cost of discipleship.

The early church expected folks to be confused when they first heard of God’s covenant of love and promise through Jesus. They expected them to be confused, because they knew from experience that you have to let go of your old self before being able to come to a new worldview that is not available until letting go becomes real.

And yet in our modern church we too often assume that folks who come to Community Congregational Church have spent time in Christian formation of confusion and questions. Jesus doesn’t intend for the Kingdom of God to be instantly accessible and understandable. He wants us to scratch our heads of why we have to look at a crucified God to see our own shortcomings and failings, because the world cannot offer what God loves and promises. Jesus even uses parables to make things intentionally muddy, to make us *feel* rather than *think* in our response to him. And often, our response is that we just want Jesus to go away. Get out of here, God. We want what we want, and once we have that, we’ll come back for you and your Spiritual stuff. Snakes over savior. Every time.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Faith is hard when we try to control the outcome of a heart-felt journey, which is by definition uncertain. But until we can allow Jesus to move into our unconscious and touch our operative worldviews, nothing substantial is going to change. It’s simply re-arranging furniture, not constructing a new room. Looking at the snake and the Cross is all about constructing a new room. Maybe even a whole new house.

Three images control us. Our image of ourselves, our image of God, and our image of the world. A true seeing and confessing of ourselves to the bronze snake and crucified God transforms those images into a more faithful acceptance of the grace and love God has given through the covenants. It’s what we mean when we say Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, the life. And we can see reality as it honestly is, not what we think or fear it is. Maybe we can ask three questions of our selves this Lenten season:

* What should life be?
* Why isn’t it? And,
* How should we repair it?

When we answer these in love, in the heart, rather than rationally in our minds, then we can be safe from the serpents in our lives, and live with purpose in THIS world, in THIS holy place, with THESE HOLY PEOPLE. Not just one of us, but all of us, at CCCG.

Thanks be to God, Amen.