

*Article*

Satan's a Goner

Lessons from a Headless Snake



Carolyn Arends on May 6, 2016

Topics: Problem Of Pain · Kingdom Living



As a kid, I loved Mission Sundays, when missionaries on furlough brought special reports in place of a sermon. Sometimes they wore exotic, foreign clothing; they almost always showed a tray of slides documenting their adventures. If they were from a dangerous enough land, the youth in our congregation would emerge from our Sunday stupor and listen intently.

There is one visit I've never forgotten. The missionaries were a married couple stationed in what appeared to be a particularly steamy jungle. I'm sure they gave a full report on churches planted or commitments made or translations begun. I don't remember much of that. What has always stayed with me is the story they shared about a snake.

One day, they told us, an enormous snake—much longer than a man—slithered its way right through their front door and into the kitchen of their simple home. Terrified, they ran outside and searched frantically for a local who might know what to do. A machete-wielding neighbor came to the rescue, calmly marching into their house and decapitating the snake with one clean chop.

The neighbor reemerged triumphant and assured the missionaries that the reptile had been defeated. But there was a catch, he warned: It was going to take a while for the snake to realize it was dead.

A snake's neurology and blood flow are such that it can take considerable time for it to stop moving even after decapitation. For the next several hours, the missionaries were forced to wait outside while the snake thrashed about, smashing furniture and flailing against walls and windows, wreaking havoc until its body finally understood that it no longer had a head.

Sweating in the heat, they had felt frustrated and a little sickened but also grateful that the snake's rampage wouldn't last forever. And at some point in their waiting, they told us, they had a mutual epiphany.

I leaned in with the rest of the congregation, queasy and fascinated. "Do you see it?" asked the husband. "Satan is a lot like that big old snake. He's already been defeated. He just doesn't know it yet. In the meantime, he's going to do some damage. But never forget that he's a goner."

The story captured our imaginations then because it was graphic and gory—a stark contrast to the normally genteel sermonizing we were used to receiving. But the story haunts me because I have come to believe it is an accurate picture of the universe. We are in the thrashing time, a season characterized by our pervasive capacity to do violence to each other and ourselves. The temptation is to despair. We have to remember, though, that it won't last forever. Jesus has already crushed the serpent's head.

Recently I heard a message from theologian Gary Deddo that got me thinking about that snake. Deddo challenges the tendency many of us have to be dualists—imagining God and Satan as equal foes deadlocked in mortal combat. To be certain, Deddo acknowledges, there is an immeasurable amount of evil in our world. But compared with God's love and power, all the evil in the universe doesn't cover the head of a pin. Love wins. Satan doesn't stand a chance.

Thus, though we wrestle with the brokenness that plagues the world, and ourselves, we do so not with grim resignation but with hopeful defiance. We face both our addictions and afflictions not with a faint, white-knuckled hope that someday we will be healed, but rather with an assurance that we are living slowly but surely into the healing already obtained on the Cross. There is still a waiting. In some cases the healing may not come in fullness until we are face-to-face with our Victor—but come it will. Guaranteed.

I've been trying to figure out what all of this means with respect to the way we deal with evil and injustice in our world. In linear, human time, perhaps the safest thing to do is batten down the hatches and wait somewhere secure till the thrashing is over. But one of the mysteries of living in God's time rather than our own is that, although the end of the story has already been determined, somehow he is still using us to write it. Because Jesus lives in us through his Spirit, we are called not just to anticipate the overcoming but also to be part of bringing it to fruition.

And so we are called to fight poverty, oppression, greed, and malice—in the world and in our own spirits. We are invited to live in light of the reality that greater by far is the living God who is within us than the dead snake thrashing about in this world.

We're glad you're here!

Helping people like you abide with Jesus is why we post resources like this one every weekday. Always ad-free, Renovaré is supported by people who know soul-care is vital. Would you join us with a micro-donation?

Give \$1/week > (<https://renovare.org/donate/dollar-a-week>)

Get Renovaré resources like this one delivered weekly

Email



Carolyn oversees the Renovaré Institute for Christian Spiritual Formation (<http://new.renovare.org/institute/overview>) as well as several other Renovaré initiatives, including the Book Club (<https://renovare.org/bookclub>). She is also a recording artist (<http://carolynarends.com/>), speaker, author (<http://carolynarends.com/site/bibliography>), and college instructor. She lives near Vancouver, BC, with her husband Mark and their two children.