

March 15, 2015  
Lent 4  
John 3:14-21  
“of snakes and healing”

Look up at the bronze serpent on the stake and live; look up at Jesus on the cross and gain eternal life. These are symbols of God’s healing power that shape our Christian lives.

But I, for one, am not a fan of snakes. I would have left the Garden of Eden ‘in a New York minute’ once I found out it was inhabited by snakes. I have a negative gut reaction to the serpent on a stake as the symbol of the modern medical profession. I don’t know what to think about those folks in Southern Appalachia for whom snake handling is spiritual encounter, a religious experience.

Here is a short dialogue from *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, by Dennis Covington (Penguin Books 1995, at page 3) The narrator had come to witness a snake-handling service at the Church of Jesus with Signs Following, and speaks to one of the witnesses, Uncle Uilly.

What’s it like to take up a serpent?” I had asked him then.

“It’s hard to explain,” Uncle Uilly had said. “You’re in a prayerful state. You can’t have your mind on other things. The Spirit tells you what to do.”

“But why do some people get bit?”

He thought about it a minute. “In that situation,” he said, “somebody must have misjudged the Spirit.”

In other words, it’s the snake handler’s fault. Not for picking up the snake, but for getting bitten. A lapse in faith, a lapse in prayer.

Is illness, misfortune – snake bite – the consequence of sin? Of not having enough faith? Enough prayer? Is snake bite God-given punishment, inspired by the Holy Spirit?

The psalmist says, (psalm 107 v. 17), “ *Some were fools and took to rebellious ways; they were afflicted because of their sins.*”

The Old Testament passage from Numbers explores the notion that God is somehow the source of pain, sickness, death, that these ordinary events of life – ‘ordinary’ because everyone experiences them at some time – that these are God’s punishment, judgment.

Having escaped slavery in Egypt, the ancient Israelites continue their wandering through the wilderness. They have yet to find that place God has chosen for their home, and their journey is

constantly interrupted by crises of one sort or another.

Two of their leaders, Aaron, Moses' brother, and Miriam, their sister, have died. The Israelite rites of cleansing surrounding sickness and death require the use of water for purification. But water is scarce, and there is not enough for both ritual cleansing and drinking. They are angry, and they accuse Moses and God of being responsible for their misery. It must, after all, be someone's fault. Right? Several thousand years later, we are still well versed in fault-assessment, finding someone or something to blame when life seems to be going awry.

An infestation of poisonous serpents overcomes the Israelites, and there are many more deaths. The people interpret this latest crisis as God's punishment for their rebellious thoughts and complaints. They confess, they repent, they pray for God to get rid of the snakes – I'd be right there with them in that effort – but the snakes don't go away.

Instead, God instructs Moses to make a serpent and place it on a stake. Those who are bitten will live, simply by looking upon the bronze serpent!

Why doesn't God just remove the poisonous snakes?

God is not found in the crises of the Israelites' journey, nor their complaints, nor the snake-bite; God is found in healing. God does not bring disease or poison into our lives, God is not 'the cause.' Indeed, God's love is so all-encompassing, so without judgment, that we are forgiven our accusations and our anger against God. God will heal our anger, take away our fears, so that we may live fully, as God intends for us to live.

The bronze serpent encourages us to see that spiritual healing is relevant to curing physical disease – snake-bite. The bronze serpent represents God's healing love, healing that includes forgiveness.

Healing requires accepting God's forgiveness. We find it hard to accept forgiveness. Sometimes, we do not even seek forgiveness because we feel so unworthy of receiving it. Think back to when you wronged a friend or family member. When forgiveness was offered, did there linger within you some sense of shame, an inability to forgive yourself, or a suspicion that the friend still harbored resentment?

Have you confessed a wrong in church, and yet hung on to your inner sense that the wrong is not yet righted in God's eyes? Were you moved to confess that same wrong again, the next Sunday? God's healing forgiveness and unconditional love are there for you. Fear, anger, estrangement from God get in the way of living. Accepting God's forgiveness is one definition of spiritual healing.

So. The serpent on a stake is the symbol of our modern medical profession. In my view, the symbol should remind us that physical and spiritual well-being are at once different and

intertwined. Another Episcopal ‘both and’.

Modern medicine focuses on the physical causes. We assume control is within our grasp, that we can get rid of the snakes – vaccinations, for example, eradicate snakes such as measles. We sometimes use poison to fight poison. Chemotherapy. These methods are effective much of the time– in the case of chemotherapy life is often extended. Still, there are unintended consequences, as we have discovered. For one, over-use of antibiotics has encouraged the development of antibiotic resistant super bugs.

What about the spiritual dis-ease that accompanies illness? Quality of life during and after treatment?

There is a larger discussion to be had about palliative care – care that is not directed to cure or treatment, but comfort. If death is approaching – as it will for all of us – how would you like to live those last months or days? Should our local hospital have at least one bed dedicated to palliative care – a bed, or two or three, available for those patients for whom active medical treatment – curative medicine – is no longer a viable option, patients who need a safe, peaceful, quiet place where care is directed to easing pain and providing comfort. Should there be places in our community where the bronze serpent is the symbol of spiritual healing rather than of getting rid of the snakes?

Like the ancient Israelites, many still hold onto mistaken beliefs that sickness is God’s punishment for wrong-doing, or a perverse test of faithfulness. “God won’t give me more than I can bear’. You’ve probably heard at least one person say that. The bronze serpent reminds us that God is found in the healing, not in the cause.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is in the middle of a conversation with Nicodemus, a high-ranking Pharisee, who has come to talk with Jesus under cover of darkness. He does not want to be seen talking with Jesus publicly. But Nicodemus has questions about God. Is God the source of his darkness?

Jesus reminds Nicodemus of the serpent on the stake. *‘Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.’* God is not the cause of disease and death. Eternal life is found with God, through the cross. Those who seek God will find God.

Jesus continues, *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.... And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world.*

God sends the light. Here is the judgment, this light that forgives, restores, redeems. The Cross compassionately moves us from a death way of being – living in a world of darkness, corruption, disease, physical and moral decay – into the way of life, light, the Kingdom of God.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says, (paraphrasing), by grace you have been saved and raised up with Christ... And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God. Eph. 2:8-10.

I would like to share an experience as hospital chaplain. (I have permission to tell this story – it is a conversation that tends to repeat itself) A woman asked me to visit her gravely ill father. As I entered the man's room, he said, *no, I don't think I want to talk to you, chaplain. God would not be interested in me.* That phrase caught my attention – I paused in the doorway to wash my hands, and asked, *why not?* He responded that *he* had never been interested in God. He lived without prayer, without belief in a higher power, or interest in any religion, and things worked out okay. So far.

Something about his response made me think of Nicodemus, who didn't want to be seen talking with Jesus, but still had questions. So I moved into the room and asked, *What would God look like to you, if there were a God?*

*Well,* he responded, *God would know my name, who I am. Everything. I'm not a saint, for sure.* And? I said. What else?

He took a deep breath. *Who I am would have to be okay with God. Won't happen,* he added, as he turned away towards the wall, ending our conversation.

I stopped by again the next day. *Last night,* he whispered, *in the darkness, I heard someone calling my name. MY Name.* He smiled gently at me. I returned the smile, and silently gave thanks for the grace of God, the peace of healing, God's unconditional love.

Paul's words resonate with me, *For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*

Look up with faith at the serpent, at the cross. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

The Rev. Diane Ramerman  
March 15, 2015