

Numbers 21:4-9 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea,^[a] to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." ⁶Then the LORD sent poisonous^[b] serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous^[c] serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3:14-21 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.^[a]

¹⁶"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."^[b]

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Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

The Poison Prescription

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A serpent on a staff. We've seen it before. We recognize it is a symbol of healing. This is one of those times when Moses, Jesus and a Greek demi-god named Asclepius overlap. We do like to tell our religious stories in similar ways, don't we? For Moses, the bronze staff and serpent were able to heal those in the wilderness who had been bitten by poisonous snakes. For Jesus, he imagines himself as the snake on a staff as a visual of the crucifixion that had the power to bring about eternal life for those who trust in him. And for Asclepius who was known throughout the Hellenistic world as a great healer, sometimes credited with raising the dead, he is often pictured with a staff entwined with a singular snake – not to be confused with the caduceus (ka – doo – see – us) which is the two snakes and a staff which represents the Greek god Hermes. (www.ancient.eu/Asclepius)

Medical organizations in the United States still use a serpent on a staff as their symbol of healing - a symbol that has thousands of years of history behind it. But probably even before any of these stories came about – Moses, Jesus, or Asclepius, human beings observed nature, and they learned a few things about snakes. What can a snake do that might make you think of healing? Or regeneration?

Yes, snakes can shed their skin and live. Given that my husband, Chuck, has had one of the science museum's snakes in his office for a while, we have a snakeskin sitting on the bookshelf in our living room. But the venom of snakes was also thought to have healing properties. The blood of Medusa, the snake headed creature of Greek mythology, was what was thought to be the gift that allowed Asclepius to raise the dead. And, we know now that the antidote for even the worst snake bites, is made directly from the venom itself. Poison as a means of healing.

Snakes, I don't know if you are afraid of them or intrigued by them, but they are strange and fascinating creatures. The lore around them is as interesting as they are themselves. I was struck this week to think about how a poisonous snake became the symbol for healing, for both the Hebrews and the Greeks. Deadly poison as the prescription for saving people from sure and certain death. Then the symbol gets borrowed by the gospel writer John to imagine Jesus' ghastly crucifixion as the updated version of the bronze serpent on a staff, one that would not only heal snakebite, but be the event that would save us from perishing in death and offer us the gift of eternal life. John, as the most Greek of the four gospels, probably realized that his audience would catch this imagery from both the Hebrew and Greek narratives and be able to apply it to Jesus and his power to be a healer.

For Jesus goes on to say, after his brief reference to himself as the bronze serpent being lifted up in the wilderness, that God has offered the Son so that all who believe in him may not perish but will have eternal life. That is the ultimate healing, the healing that can only be performed by gods or children of the gods – according to a wide variety of ancient religious mythologies. Eternal life, immortality, resurrection from the dead – these are powers that cannot be attributed typically to natural healers or doctors. But they do put us in mind of snakes who can crawl out of their own skin, and caterpillars that turn into butterflies, and other natural creatures that seem to have unnatural abilities to regenerate or remake themselves into something new. Since the earliest of days, we human beings have looked both to nature and beyond nature to try to understand this radical healing, this wholeness, the salvation that promises us life beyond death, or life that lasts forever.

So we have turned to the snake as means of metaphorical explanation. The snake is the gateway to death in the Garden of Eden story. The snake is the tempter, the seducer, the wily creature who is cursed for his craftiness and ability to dupe the humans. But then the bronze serpent wielded by Moses, or talked about as complete in Jesus, is lifted on a strange staff to take away the power of death and return us to a time when we would know life eternal as a gift. And, friends, this sounds to me once again like the poison itself is what is used for healing. This poisonous death by every kind of sin known to humankind becomes our cure. The innocent blood spilled

becomes the power of forgiveness. What kind of strange formula is this? How do we make sense of it?

Well, for one thing, we've heard it almost too often. It's so familiar that we don't even think of it as strange. *Jesus died to save us from our sins.* How exactly does that work? We've heard that in church, in culture, and likely by someone close to us. But it translates somehow as to God wanted this cruelty, created this poison, dispatched these snakes, this venom, this cross, to teach us a lesson for our own misdeeds. And that's how we get saved – by this act of punishment or vengeance taken out on Jesus, because it should have been taken out on us. What, in God's name, makes us think that way? That the poison is our cure. That the cross is our salvation.

I'm back to the snake as a symbol of healing. It sure does remind me of the symbol of our salvation – the cross. These are such backward symbols. A poisonous snake should remind us of death. The cross should be a symbol of fear, of torture and punishment. And yet, we take these objects that should be reminders of our mortality and frailty and make them symbols of healing and salvation. Maybe that's exactly the point. We want to avoid death for absolutely as long as possible, and we also want to know that beyond death, there is something more. So, we take these symbols of fear and turn them into beacons of hope. Crazy? Maybe? But somehow those symbols have endured and endured beyond even the metaphorical or theological interpretations attached to them. We see a picture of a snake on a staff and think –

healing. We see a representation of the execution method of the Roman Empire and think – salvation, wholeness, eternal life. It doesn't make logical sense, but maybe it touches something deeper within us than logic.

Here's where I'm going with that. I absolutely hate the cliché, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." There are plenty of tired old sayings that fit that category, things meant to make us buck up and stay positive. We live in America, the land of positive thinking, so these sayings are plentiful, but I'm not sure they're helpful. And sometimes they do a great deal of damage. It sounds like a Cosmo quote that someone (a Presbyterian pastor no less) posted on Facebook this week, "You were given this life because you are strong enough to live it." I don't like those sayings, but I get them. Someone may have felt uplifted by that. But I've lived long enough to feel the poison, to be touched by the death of loved ones, to see hearts ache, and lives destroyed. It takes a good amount of privilege to have the kind of life where you always feel strong enough and supported enough to live it without question. I've had questions. Big ones. About the unfairness and injustice of it all.

And somehow this knowledge that we have already tasted the poison and lived, already sinned beyond redemption, and still are saved, now that does have some healing power. To know that there's no low in my life that can't be touched by the presence of Jesus is amazing news. That's the healing power of the worst punishment

Rome could dish out. That's redemption beyond humiliation. That's the antibodies derived from the venom poisoning our lives being able to cure us.

Now, our modern day metaphor for this may come from our understanding of cancer. Cancer is an invasion of the body, just as evil can be an invasion to the spirit. It wounds us. It damages us. It makes us weak and leaves us depleted. And to rid ourselves of cancer – we use chemotherapy and radiation. We kill the bad with the worse. We use poison to kill that which poisons. Having never lived through this experience personally, I can only tell about what I know from others. But surviving cancer can be everything from a blip in an otherwise normal life, to the extreme of going to hell and back. It's nothing that contrived “be positive” sayings can help. Yes, our friends and family who are battling cancer need us, but they need us when they are beat up and worn out even more than when they've had a good day. A good day with cancer, that's a symbol right there of how we live with the pain of our own mortality so close, so so close.

I'm not sure how much I can say about snakes, and staffs, and crosses. This sermon is part history, part reflection, and part concern that we have these deep symbols that touch our lives in ways beyond words, beyond head knowledge. I don't know if you've seen them, but there are several artists who make crosses that fit within the contours of a human hand, so that you can clutch it in prayer. That's what I'm getting at here. Our most enduring religious symbol may not make perfect logical

sense, but to hold the cross, to feel its shape, to let it touch the parts of the brain that don't do theology or write doctrine but feel deeply, that's what I'm getting at here. We allow fear and hope to mingle together at the cross. We are struck by the image that what causes injury to the body might also be what heals us to a new level. No one wants to be bit by a snake, or taken to trial, or hear their doctor say "cancer." But these things are realities of human life. So, we respect the gravity of our circumstance, and persevere anyway – with the symbols that let us know that life is tedious and short – but nevertheless, amazing beyond comparison. Amen.