

Christ Lifted Up
(Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:13-17)

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A Snake on a Pole

Have you ever wondered why a snake on a pole is a symbol for the field of medicine? A pole makes sense (*as we have established*). Putting something on a pole draws attention to it. But why a snake?

The snake on a pole symbol has a long history going back to Asclepius, the Greek God of Healing 2500 years ago, who identified himself by carrying a stick with a snake on it. But it is believed by many to originate out of some connection with this morning's Old Testament reading.

“Poisonous Snakes”

In some ways the Old Testament version of the story is easy to understand.

It is easy to understand that we live in a world teeming with “snakes”; if by snakes we mean, things that can cause us great alarm by sneaking up and biting and injecting poison into us.

A lot of things in this world work like that. Covid behaved very much like this. It was as though a barrel full of snakes had been unleashed on

us. And we rushed frantically about, trying to avoid getting “bitten”. And it killed a lot of people.

Some people even thought of the vaccinations as a kind of “poisonous snake bite.” They were afraid that the vaccine itself was going to cause them harm. And all the while, the medical community, sent out the message, “Come and get your vaccines here!” And so, finally enough of the population came and got their life-saving “snake-bites” under the trusty 2500 year old banner of Asclepius.

Sin

But the central concern of the story is not infectious disease. There is another kind of “snake bite pandemic” that we human beings inflict upon ourselves; that is of our own making. The Biblical word for this kind of snake bite is “sin.” When we sin against another person, it is as though we were administering a snake bite that poisons that person’s heart and mind.

So, for example, when the Israelites began to complain against each other, as they journeyed through the wilderness, they were injecting a “poison” into their fellow sojourners, through the bite of their words and deeds. And we know today that it is literally true, that when a

person is exposed to an environment of bitterness, stress, hatred, and all manner of negativity, that these emotions effect the chemistry of our bodies, literally poisoning us.

Idolatry as the Root Cause of Sin

The Bible as a whole argues that the sins we commit against each other have a deeper cause. They are the result of idolatry; of following after or worshipping false God's in place of the true God.

Idols are basically representations of God, that are not God. To be very blunt about it, they masquerade as truth, because they offer us salvation in return for our obedience, even though they have no power to save us. They tempt us to go down dead-end paths, much as the "snake" in the garden tempted Adam and Eve.

The desire for things like fame, financial or material security or physical beauty, many things can become idols. Even other people can become idols when we let our devotion to them replace our devotion to the true God. Their bite is delivered at the point at which they separate us from God. And it is often quick and relatively painless in comparison to the agony they will deliver later.

Because then the poison in the false promises goes to work. Perhaps unnoticeably at first. But at some point we start to lose our bearings. We start seeing double, feel our judgement being paralyzed in ways that, if left unchecked will lead to a moral coma and spiritual death. Very dramatic, I know. But that's how I read it. (*Sin has very damaging physical effects*).

The Basic Point

Both the Old Testament and Gospel version of the story share a basic point. That for us to be freed from the power of sin to destroy us, we must choose rightly who we will follow and then keep our eyes and full attention on that one. And it is especially important to remember this in those desperate circumstances when the snakes seem to be all around us and we feel threatened.

For us as Christians, this means lifting up the cross of Jesus and staying focused on all he represents in the face of every temptation to succumb to sin.

The Modern Version

I'd like to stop here and return to a theme that has been on my mind a lot, as I think about the children and young people today are facing growing up in today's world. I'm talking about our relationship with a

communications technology that is developing more quickly than we can adapt to it.

I want to mention this, because I think that today's Old Testament story is being rewritten today on a global scale. However, the dangers remain the same and the answer remains the same. This is how I would retell it:

The 2023 Version

Once there was a pioneer in technology named Steve Jobs. He looked at the inconveniences in our lives. He noted all the pesky little snakes that bite us, sucking up our time and wearing us out; all those things that require tedious interactions with other people.

And then he said, I have created an answer that will save you from all these inconveniences. And he picked up his newly invented smart phone and put it on a pole and lifted it up and said, "Whenever you are in danger of succumbing to tedious interactions with others or are bitten by deadly boredom, focus your attention on this phone and you will be saved.

And it worked. All over the world today, whenever people are experiencing distress, they turn to their smart phones. With these devices they can call or text anyone, anywhere in the world. They can follow directions to new addresses. They can look up interesting facts, play games, listen to music and learn how to fix things. They can order things without leaving the house and pay for them without using cash. They can do all the things that make all the peskier interactions with other people disappear.

Last time Sheryl and I were in New York City riding the subway, we noticed that almost everyone was looking at their smartphones. It's very understandable. On a subway, you are sitting across from strangers from all over the world. And it is hard to know where to direct your attention. You don't want to seem to be staring at someone or eyeing them in some way they might misinterpret. You also don't really want to look at the ceiling the whole time. I suppose you could read a book.

It must have seemed like a blessing to all those subway riders when the smart phone was invented, because it suddenly gave everyone a much more comforting and entertaining way to avoid this awkward situation.

It is no wonder, with all these advantages, that most people today don't go anywhere without their phones. I myself grow quite upset when I

can't find mine on the way out the door. I search frantically for it. And if I don't have it, I feel as though something critical has been left behind. I worry that I may find myself wasting a few precious minutes of my life with nothing to do! (It's interesting that I don't get anxious this way, when I leave the house without a Bible).

A Faith Question

Personally, I don't think smart phones are such a bad thing. When God created the world, he repeatedly proclaimed it good. And that would include creating us with the ability to develop incredible technologies and to delight in them.

But there some troubling questions that give me pause. "Am I using my smart phone to do things that I really need to do or is my smart phone using me?" And "If my smart phone is using me, then what kind of person is it turning me into?" Does my smartphone separate me from relationships that are tedious in the moment, but that someday I will wish I had paid closer attention to? Might it become a tool that allows me to hide from what is happening in the here and now?

I think that for a lot of people the answer has to be "Yes." I think smartphones have become idols for many of us and especially for

younger generations that have never lived in a world in which every adult doesn't always have one within arm's reach.

Like all idols, the smartphone requires our constant devotion, promises to deliver us, but has no power to do so. Because, like all idols they are based on a lie, that separates us from God.

The smartphone's lie is that you will be better off alone, looking into this phone, than you would be, if you put the phone down in order to be where you are and with whoever you are with.

I think that is a lie, because I believe that the only thing that can truly save us is God's love. And the way God teaches us how to love is through the encounters we have with each other, here and now, face to face, when we are as fully present with each other as we can be. And these are the very situations, the cell phones allow us to hide from.

The Church's Role

The church's promise of life depends on keeping our eyes first on Christ who was nailed to a cross as the ultimate expression of self-giving love. And I think that means a couple of things in this smart phone crazy world.

First it means being nailed to what is happening right here and now and denying ourselves the option of escaping into cyberspace. It means being fully present with others in the here and now, for their sake, as Christ was present with us for our sake.

But, being nailed to the here and now is also for our sake, because it is the way we come to recognize the beauty hidden in very ordinary things and in ordinary people, which is a very different thing from consuming the diet of sensationalism and novelty that our smartphones are constantly feeding us.

Ending

I think that you and I and our church have an important role to play, as a reminder to ourselves and to the younger generation, that the overwhelming power of our technology and the many distractions it provides, must not separate us from the true reason for our existence in this world; which is to experience the love God for which we were created. There is no greater prize than this. And I believe that it is our responsibility to hold up the banner of Christ, that will lead our loved ones to it.

The Puzzling Aspects

There are some puzzling things about this story that the Biblical Tradition has only answered for us in unsatisfying ways. One is, "Why would a God who loves and seeks to save his people, punish them by sending poisonous snakes among them?" It seems like a very cruel way to punish people, even if they have behaved badly.

And the only answer we have is that what God chooses to do surpasses our understanding. And so the question: Why? will always be with us in tragic circumstances. Our faith in a loving God simply has to coexist with the fact that God either does things or allows things that we understand to be cruel and unloving.

Another thing that is at first puzzling, is that God tells Moses to make another snake, of all things, as the standard that the people should turn and look at in order to be saved from. Why not pick something that is clearly not identifiable as a snake, something that is say, clearly the opposite of a snake?

And I think that the answer has to do with the hidden nature of God's salvation. Just as the antidote to the poisonous snakes is a snake on a pole, the antidote to human suffering in Christianity is the suffering man on the cross. And this helps us to understand that, to be free of the suffering that leads to death, one must enter into the suffering that leads to life, as Jesus did.