

“He Lifted Up a Bronze What??!!!”
A Sermon for The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Based on Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-21

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By Bishop Wayne Miller

Good morning! It is a very great joy and privilege for me to be with you here today, to worship with you and to bring you greetings from the 205 congregations and 110,000 baptized members of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod... taking our place among the 65 synods and 4.7 million members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America... taking our place among the 68 million members of the Lutheran World Federation... taking our place within the communion of saints of every time and place... Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...

For some odd reason I felt moved this week to study up on the treatment protocol for poisonous snakebite. I found it all laid out very nicely in 14 steps in this little First Aid book:

1. Carefully remove the snake (actually it doesn't say that but it seemed like an important step to include).
2. Immobilize the wounded area if snake has not already done this.
3. Place a loose tourniquet 2 to 4 inches above the wound (except when bitten at the base of the neck).
4. Sterilize a knife and make an incision at each puncture
5. Apply suction with the suction cup found in your snakebite kit (now they tell me to bring a kit).
6. Wash the wound thoroughly
7. Place cold wet cloth over the wound
8. Do not administer alcohol in any form! (unless you accidentally brought your home communion kit instead of your snakebite kit!).
9. Treat victim for shock
10. Give artificial respiration if needed
11. Consult a physician (it seems to me that this one should appear a little higher on the list)
12. See if the victim can walk
13. Telephone ahead to the nearest hospital for anti-venom.
14. At all times, keep the victim quiet and reassure him.

This last point of course, brings me back to my first point about removing the snake. Because if there is anything in this world that would not be very calming or reassuring to a victim of snakebite it would be having to continually look at the snake that bit you.

Which is exactly why I have always been so fascinated by the prescription that God offered Moses to deal with the snake problem. The truth is that as I imagine myself in this story with the prospect of venomous vipers sharing my sleeping bag every night, there are few images that would have been less quieting, healing or reassuring than the image of a bronze serpent on a pole. The snake was the problem, not the solution!

It is true, of course, that cultural folklore will sometimes make assertions like, “You have to fight fire with fire.” And I can remember being advised by some of my college friends that the best cure for a certain kind of headache is a little hair from the same dog that had bitten me. Still for most of us, most of the time, logic, common sense and intuition all suggest that fire is better fought with water, headaches with aspirin, and that snakebite calls for some anti-venom more sensible than a bronzed reappearance of the problem.

And I might just add that the very same common sense applies when the serpent that threatens to poison or devour us is nothing more and nothing less than our own human nature; which is why we may find ourselves, on those days when we become more painfully aware than usual of the unpleasant twists and curves in our own nature. . . we may find ourselves ravaging through the medicine chest looking for a sensible way to treat the problem.

In some cases it may seem most practical to pack up and move; to find some other place to pitch your tent that will allow you to escape from the problem; perhaps to a new city, or a new job, a new spouse or partner that seems less toxic; an ounce of prevention, after all, is worth a pound of cure.

So, instead of fleeing from the snake, you may choose to lift the antidote up on a pole for everyone to see in hopes that if they look more closely at an image of your goodness, perhaps they won't notice what's really eating you. . . So if you are feeling a little insecure about your ability as a parent, what you keep putting up on display is a photo album of all your kids' achievements and accomplishments, and if you aren't so sure about your own goodness you find ways to call special attention to your acts of virtue and generosity, and when someone politely asks you how you are doing... it is the times when your heart is breaking into a thousand pieces that are the very times when you are most emphatic about smiling broadly and answering, "I'm doing just great thanks."

But perhaps most dangerous of all is that tendency to try to escape from the bite of our own human nature by lifting someone else's nature up on a pole and pointing the finger of blame at their serpent so as to deflect attention from our own. The economy would take care of itself just fine, if the government would butt out... We wouldn't have buried ourselves in all this debt if it weren't for those greedy bank executives... the city would be perfect if it weren't for the public school system... if it weren't for the crack pots...if it weren't for those undocumented Latinos. Life would be good if it weren't for my boss, or my parents, or my kids, or my youth or my age...

But with all do respect to the creativity of all these attempts at self-healing, I have to say that in all my experience in this business of caring for souls, I cannot think of a single time when a change of venue has protected anyone from the serpent within. I cannot think of a single person that has ever been healed from self-doubt and insecurity by the outward display of achievement and success. And I cannot think of a single person that has ever been forgiven by confessing someone else's sins... Sometimes, it seems, the best thing the medicine cabinet has to offer is the mirror on the cabinet door.

So today, we who gather here, allow Moses, once again, to do the unthinkable and to call all of us who have been bitten to stare both the biter and the bite squarely in the eye...

And in the process of looking courageously at the very thing we would rather not see, perhaps to notice another detail from this story that is not exactly obvious in our English translation... which is that the serpent of bronze that Moses lifted up was in fact not exactly a snake. It was a mythical creature known as a "seraph" which took the form of a snake with wings... a snake that has been mysteriously transformed and empowered to rise up just a bit out of the dust and ashes it was born into... a mythic symbol of hope that what has been is not necessarily all that can be. And because of this, the peculiar little sculpture that Moses placed up on a pole was not so much a human image of God as it was God's image of us!

Today we are once again called to fix our gaze on the serpentine image hanging from a tree and so to behold once again that central paradoxical truth of the Christian faith; which is that after gazing down upon the problem of human nature, God chose to fight fire with fire, to appropriate a little hair from the biting dog and to address the problem of human nature by assuming a human nature . . .

And yet a human nature with a surprising twist. Because in the image of this one man, Jesus, lifted high upon a tree, you may also find yourself strangely quieted and reassured with the hope that what has been is not necessarily all that will be.

In the image of this one man named Jesus, you may also be quieted and reassured by the promise that when you were lifted up out of the waters of your baptism you were given a brand new identity as a winged messenger of God's boundless love and inexhaustible hope.

In the image of this one man named Jesus, you have been lifted up just a little way out of the dust from which you have come... lifted up and set free to enter into the very skin of the poor, the homeless the despised and rejected... to become one with precisely that part of creation that everyone else is scrambling in panic to avoid like a plague... You have been lifted up now, brothers and sisters, ordinary serpents though you may be, so that somehow, quite miraculously, the wounded and bitten and poisoned of this world might come to gaze upon this image of the body of Christ... and live. Amen.