

3 10 24 Fourth Sunday in Lent

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

Why did it have to be snakes?



There was a music teacher at our high school in suburban Chicago who always went the extra mile to include every student in the process of learning choral music. One student in particular had an undiagnosed learning disability, and despite best efforts, music was proving to be an insurmountable obstacle. The teacher wrote a letter to the guidance counselor explaining the situation, he wrote, “in conclusion, this student is unable to understand abstract symbols.” The guidance counselor wrote back saying, “maybe the student can try a different instrument.”

Symbols (not the bronze, percussion kind) are representations that point to a greater reality, and they have a significant role in our lives. The symbol of a wedding ring points to the greater reality of a commitment; the symbol of a prayer shawl points to a greater respect for God; and the symbol of the golden arches of McDonalds points to a greater respite for weary parents – you know what I mean!

Scripture provides countless examples of symbols of the Jewish and Christian faith communities – the 10 commandments; the rainbow; broken bread and the cup poured out. We also find in the Bible how symbols can be used and sometimes misused. Today we are considering the symbolism of snakes and the cross.

Your first question: Are snakes a celebrated creation of God or a symbol of evil in the world? A person can be wise as a serpent or a snake in the grass. The snake in the Garden of Eden was a symbol of temptation, but the temptation was to gain greater knowledge. The fear of snakes is in the top 3 of

all fears, but in 1968 the most desired car on the road was named the Shelby Cobra – a symbol of ultimate coolness. Whether or not snakes are good or bad depends on your perspective.

In today's reading from the book of Numbers snakes are portrayed as *both* good and bad. The people of Israel had been following Moses around in the desert for years, and they were going through yet another phase of complaining. Apparently the water and food God sent to them was not satisfactory, and their whining escalated. No longer were they complaining about Moses or about Aaron, instead they grumbled about God.

(Just an aside – NOT a good idea to complain to the Creator of the universe about what **kind** of daily bread and sustenance is provided when you're lost in the wilderness and starving.) Yahweh didn't respond well to the lack of thanksgiving and the increase in kvetching. So the Lord sent venomous snakes (bad snakes) to punish the people. Once the people saw the consequences of their protests (death by snake bites), they repented. Apparently it's never too late to repent, because Yahweh directed Moses to make a bronze snake (a good snake) to heal them. What began as a symbol of punishment ended as a symbol of God's mercy and healing.

That bronze snake was still around for a few hundred years. It evolved into an idol: an idol with a name, Nehushtan, an idol to whom offerings were brought... it was an idol that distracted the people from their devotion to Yahweh. The people became more focused on the object rather than the message of faith. Over time, subtly and sinfully, they tried to infuse it with power of its own, rather than see it as a symbol of the power of God.

Think of it this way – have you ever been out on a walk with your dog, you get to the park and throw a ball, and your dog just sits there. So you point

to where the ball went. The dog dutifully looks at your pointing finger. *No, you say, the ball... over there!* The dog just gets more excited about your finger, which was functioning as a symbol of the-direction-of-the-ball. Over the centuries the Hebrew people became obsessed with the snake on the staff, not the true source of healing.

About 500 years after the creation of the snake and staff (what we now recognize as the medical symbol, the caduceus) King Hezekiah came to the throne of Judah in 715 BCE. He was known as the 'religious reform King' who reinstated religious traditions in the lives of the people. His goal was to restore the faith of the people of God who had fallen away. The first reform instituted by Hezekiah was to destroy anything that could be considered an idol so it could no longer distract people from their true God. The first idol he destroyed was that bronze snake that Moses held up in the desert.

King Hezekiah made a bold and positive move when he destroyed the snake that had first harmed the people through venom, then became a symbol of their healing, and finally devolved into an idol: a symbol of their rebellion against God.

The cross has gone through a similar evolution as a symbol. The cross was a 1st century instrument of torture and death. It evoked the same images in the minds of the people that seeing an electric chair or hearing the words *lethal injection* evokes for us. And yet for many of us here today the cross is a beloved symbol of what we believe. How is that possible^? Only through the power, love and grace of God can an instrument of death become a symbol of the triumph of faith.

John 3:14-21 is the account of Jesus predicting his own death for the first time. Jesus draws an analogy between lifting up the Son of Man and

Moses lifting that bronze snake, saying that eternal life is gained not by the suffering, but through faith in God. “Look at the serpent and live.” “Believe in the Son of man and live eternally.” In these stories we see a foreshadowing of how the symbol of death becomes a symbol of life.

However, like the symbol of the snake, the cross has been manipulated through the centuries to justify destructive human actions: for seeking conversion through Holy Wars and genocide; for excluding and dividing Christians among themselves; and for terrorizing people in their own homes by setting crosses on fire. In these instances the cross has been defiled by the human failings of greed, hate and self-interest. The tragedy is that rather than receiving the heart of God given to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus - the good news symbolized in the cross - we reject God’s heart and try instead to manipulate its meaning.

Perhaps the cross has become an idol of sorts. We superimpose power on the object in an attempt to manipulate it for our own benefit. Perhaps the cross, like the bronze serpent on a staff, is also destined to be destroyed. Perhaps we need a modern day Hezekiah to shake us up and turn our focus back to God, not to the object of faith. OR, you and I can reclaim the concept of a symbol, being mindful not to get lost in the symbol (or the pointing finger) but what the symbol points TO.

It **IS** possible for a symbol to maintain its ability to ground and center us, **and** to point us to God, **without** being manipulated for our own purposes. We have the option of claiming our own symbols that honor our encounters with God. That symbol can be a caduceus representing physical healing, or a cross representing spiritual healing, or a hymn, a stone, a shirt, a plant or a candle –

Our work together in the restorative healing process is a symbol pointing us to God, not an end in itself.

Finally, this season of Lent is a symbol of our larger journey together with Christ through the struggles of a life of faith, the challenges of the wilderness, and the promise of a resurrection to come. I pray we will all draw closer to God as a result of the symbol in our lives that point us to our true Source of Life and Love.

Amen.

Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The 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." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The 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. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So 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

And 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. "For God so loved the world that the only Son was given, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "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. Those 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. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But 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."