

# SERPENT

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Numbers 21: 4-9 - The bronze serpent  
Psalm 107:1-22, *Voices United*, p. 831, parts 1-2  
John 3:14-21 - Jesus and Nicodemus  
Ephesians 2:1-10 - Saved by grace through faith

Just imagine for a moment being part of that band of slaves from Egypt who had made this dramatic escape, were wandering in the wilderness trusting this Moses to take them somewhere, and finding that things were turning out worse than they had been. And as if the food weren't bad enough, there were now these snakes and some people were dying. They went to Moses thinking he would do something useful, but he has made a bronze image of the very snake that had been biting people, has hung it up on a pole, and tells the people who have been bitten by the snake to come and look at it. The amazing thing is that they are healed--healed from a fatal bite simply by looking at the image of the creature that inflicted the injury.

The human mind being what it is, we just absolutely scramble to try to come up with an explanation, right? And I don't think there is one. That image has recurred again and again in human history. One fascinating tidbit in the Old Testament itself is that, some five hundred years later when Israel was threatened by Assyria just before the reform, nations all around had been gobbled up the aggressive advance of Assyria. Israel itself was on the verge of being gobbled, and King Hezekiah decided the only chance to avert that fate was to depend on Yahweh and therefore to reform all of the unfaithfulness of the nation. So Hezekiah's reform involved the destruction of many pagan customs. And one of the things Hezekiah did was to destroy the bronze serpent. The Israelites had been burning incense to it and had a name for it. It had become an idol, and had been there for five hundred years. So it had an amazing grip on the people of Israel.

Also, in the parallel culture of Greece, there was a legend of a semi-magical semi-divine healer named Asclepius who turned himself into a serpent in his healing work. The people adopted that symbol of the snake, called the Staff of Asclepius, wrapped around a pole. Even today it is the symbol of the Canadian Medical Association and the American Medical Association--the Staff of Asclepius, the serpent on the pole.

I even thought to ask one of my physician friends this past week what they learned in medical school about the meaning of this symbol. He said "I have no idea." Obviously, he must have been sick that day. There must be some of you who are physicians who were there that day when they taught all the doctors what the Staff of Asclepius means, but maybe not.

In a version of the symbol from later Greek history, there is the staff or wand or something of the god Hermes--of the god Mercury in the Roman version. The pole has two wings on the top and there are two snakes inter-twined--a kind of double helix. So this snake on the pole has persisted as a symbol in our culture.

Looking at Jungian psychology, Jung talks about archetypes. These are symbols that exist in the depth, in the human unconscious, and are universal across cultural lines--that is, independent of intercultural influences. One of these universal symbols is the snake, and in dream analysis the serpent often shows up in association with the experience of healing. So even in Jungian archetypes the serpent is an archetype of healing. It has many other meanings too, because

among the neighbouring peoples of ancient Israel there were nations who worshipped the serpent as a divine image, as a goddess image. There was a sense of power, therefore, in the image of the serpent. But we have this simple picture of ancient Israel in the wilderness experiencing the healing power of looking at the serpent--the very beast that had bitten them.

Another little tangent: As I was thinking about this I thought about the old saying about the hair of the dog that bit you. That saying didn't actually start out meaning a cure for hangovers! It has an earlier origin in medieval medicine, and was actually a belief that if someone were bitten by a dog, cutting some of the hair of the dog's tail and putting it into the wound would produce a healing effect.

That has been developed even further in the principle "like heals like." The Latin expression *similia similibus curantur* means the same thing. What I discovered is that this is the founding principle of homeopathic medicine. Homeopathic medicine started out by people exploring this idea that a particular drug that produces a particular kind of symptom in a healthy person would actually cure the disease that produced that symptom. In other words, the way to find a cure for a particular disease is to look at its symptoms and find some kind of a drug that would cause those symptoms in a healthy person and would cure the disease. That's the founding principle of homeopathic medicine.

There's something about that concept that seems to have shown up in so many different places in human history. There's something about that which is wrong such that, looking at it, facing it, embracing it, actually has a redemptive effect. Obviously the most significant reference is today's passage from John's gospel where John has Jesus saying that, just as the serpent is lifted up in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up. And so we have in Jesus' words a parallel between the serpent hanging on the pole and Christ hanging on the Cross, as if that were something of a hint for us about the meaning or the power or the significance of the Cross.

I read some of the reflections about this in sermon notes that are available on various websites and in other sources and I found, as I would usually expect, much theological puzzling about the meaning of the doctrine of atonement. People argue about the sacrifice and what it means that God sacrificed his son, and we struggle a great deal with that sacrificial idea. And then there is the exemplary idea of the atonement where we try to look at the amazing power of God's love that is shown through Christ's suffering. Or we look at in terms of a clash between the powers of good and the powers of evil and the ultimate defeat of the powers of evil and death. Those arguments go on for ever.

But there is something about this story associated with the serpent on the pole that just pulls the rug out from under all of those ideas. None of those theologies of our atonement gives us any hint of what this serpent parallel can possibly mean. There is a hymn, written by one of the St. Louis Jesuits, that I used to sing years ago. It has this very, very simple refrain: "Behold the wood of the Cross on which is hung our salvation. Come, let us adore." There was no explanation of what was happening when the people looked at the serpent in the wilderness. It's a very simple story; there's nothing elaborate. There is only one thing that happens. The people just look at it. And so it occurs to me that perhaps this is an important part of our grasp of the Cross. I'm not even going to say "understanding" because it's not an understanding. Maybe the power of the Cross operates so far beyond our rational understanding that all of our theological ponderings will always fall short. And perhaps the insight into the Cross from today's story in Numbers is that the power of the Cross comes simply from looking at it, simply from beholding the Cross.

That's a little different for us Protestants. We have this tendency to want to jump past Good Friday really quickly and get on to the bunnies and the butterflies. We want to get on to the Good News and the resurrection because that somehow completes the story that is left hanging so

incomplete on Good Friday. Now it is a valid, true, part of our theology that we are resurrection people. But perhaps we miss some of the power of the Easter story when we move too quickly past Good Friday. Maybe our Roman Catholic friends have something to teach us by their crucifixes picturing not only empty Crosses but sometimes also the Cross with Christ on it, and that it is in the beholding.

There is a brief four-line poem, a song, called “Serpent” and written by Carolyn McDade. It is even more enigmatic than the story from Numbers, but it’s a healing image and I’ll read you the words: “

*In the places that reek of impossibility the serpent of Life coils.  
She crawls upon the swollen stone . . . and loosens her only garment.”*

That picture of the snake shedding its skin has always been seen as an image of transformation, of healing.

In the Book of Isaiah we have perhaps the second most enigmatic passages of the Old Testament which is the suffering servant. These are images of one who suffers and in whose suffering is our redemption. From Isaiah 53: The servant was “despised and rejected . . . wounded for our transgressions . . . Upon him was the punishment that made us whole and by his bruises we are healed.” And so there is something of the redemptive power of Christ’s Passion which takes its power from the principle of the redemptive power of suffering. We end up with all kinds of horrible things if we try to analyze and explain it in too literalistic a way. It is simply a metaphor with a power that we cannot deny--the redemptive power of innocent suffering.

Just leave it at that, just leave it at that, because it goes right along with the serpent on the pole. And it goes along with Christ, the one in whom was all that is good and right and godly and perfect and innocent, hanging in the most horrific suffering. It would be like someone who has been fatally bitten by a snake being told to go and look at the snake, look at it, see it. We who have been wounded, bitten, broken, by the brutality and the cruelty and the suffering in our world would find the healing of our brokenness as a humanity and as individuals by looking, by looking at the son of God broken on the Cross--not by theologically analyzing it and coming up with the right beliefs, but just by looking at it, just by seeing it profoundly and deeply.

It’s hard, and of course Mel Gibson’s motion picture portrayal of “The Passion of the Christ” is hard. It’s a motion picture but it’s not entertainment. It’s not something to go to and enjoy. I’m sure many of you have seen it, and I’m sure many of you have decided that you’re not going to see it. Mel Gibson’s very explicitly-stated intention is to push people over the edge, to go beyond the limit of what we can endure in watching the suffering of another. But there’s not a lot of theologizing in it. It’s not analyzed; it’s simply portrayed in its horrific power. Many of the people who have seen it have felt that strange enigmatic power, that healing redemptive power, of simply looking, simply looking at the suffering of an innocent one.

I commend the movie to you. But if watching it isn’t what you want to do, make a point some time throughout this Lenten season before we come here on Easter Sunday morning to celebrate the resurrection, make a point some time throughout the rest of Lent to find a moment to sit down and simply contemplate the Passion, the Cross, Christ lifted up. Simply contemplate. Don’t try to understand it; just behold the wood of the Cross on which is hung our salvation. Come, look, and adore.

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor