

Year B, 2018
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Fourth Sunday in Lent
Exodus 20:1-17; St. John 2:13-22

✠ In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

If I had any sense, I would just write this serpent story off as something from our pre-scientific, magical and mythical past. It has deep roots in the Egyptian pantheon of gods (which may explain where the Hebrews picked it up). That's a problem. In fact, by the time of king Hezekiah, in the 8th century before Jesus, this practice of the healing serpent was declared idolatrous and eliminated from Temple worship (2 Kgs 18.4)--Jews were very sensitive about graven images, after all. So, if I had as much sense as Hezekiah, I'd just let it go, too.

But then I remembered that the medical profession (particularly in the US) has as its symbol this serpentine staff—the caduceus—two snakes coiled around a staff with wings at the top. But, alas, it is not from this Biblical story or from Moses that the medical profession traces its healing roots; but rather from Asklepius, a Greek healer who walked with a staff with a single snake coiled around it during the classical period, 5 centuries before Christ—at time of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Hippocrates. He was known throughout the Greek world as the greatest healer and was, in fact, considered a god. Great temples were dedicated to him in cities across the ancient world, where people would journey by the droves and camp out and wait for Asklepius to pass by and wave his reptilian staff.

His temples were still in use when there came to Palestine a healer of a different brand—one who made house calls. Jesus had no temple or hospital or caduceus; He moved from town to town and wherever He went people brought to Him their sick and He healed them. But Asklepius gets the credit of the medical profession as being the symbol of their healing skills. And Jesus went on to Calvary to become much more than a healer, and His cross a symbol of a greater healing—of reconciliation and redemption.

Those wandering Hebrews, according to the Bible, were a blessed people. God provided for them with bread from heaven and water from a rock. However, they didn't count their blessing; they counted their grievances. This story in the Book of Numbers is not about a few

disgruntled people making a stink—that would have been so normal that it wouldn't have been worth recording. This is a story about a contagious, hate-speech campaign against Moses and God by all the people; this is negativity, bitterness and complaining gone viral! It reminds me of the game some teenagers play called, *Ain't it Awful*—one child complains about how awful his or her parents are and the next in line says, “Well if you think that's bad ...;” negative one-upmanship that just keeps building. And, as always in this story, that kind of poisoned atmosphere was a breeding ground for poisonous serpents whose bite is scorching and sometimes even deadly. That makes this story about today—a window through which we can see our own culture of grievance and the poisonous environment it has produced. The lesson says that God sent the lethal serpents; but somebody had to open the tent flap and let them in and somebody had to feed and nurture them to help them grow to enormous size. Blame God if you want, but I think the cause lies much closer to home. Perhaps the people didn't create the poisonous snakes, but they certainly fed them.

After there has been enough misery, destruction and death, a delegation went to Moses to request his intercession with the Almighty for salvation. “Ask God to make it all just go away,” they begged. God didn't just make it all go away because God knew that if it just went away, they would have learned nothing about the dangers of continuing to feed the beast. God did, however, give them a means of relief—shaped like the very thing that was destroying them—like a vaccination which contains the very virus as an antigen. Moses is directed to make an image of that fiery, winged serpent—that dragon—that was causing their discomfort, and to direct them to look on that image every time what they had continued to feed came back to bite them! The first step in being saved, you see, is to identify the serpent and recognize and confess our own participation and complicity in nurturing that poisonous viper!

What's presented in this story is not the crabbing of a few malcontents but a culture of complaint, anger, bitterness, and irresponsibility. It's the kind of culture in which we're living. It's the kind of fire-breathing dragon that can kill churches, destroy communities, make politics toxic and public discourse impossible. It infects individuals and whole systems. It serves not to build things up but to tear things down. Perhaps we didn't create it, but

we've got to stop feeding it.

In His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus used several images to try to open his heart and mind: the birth from above, the wind blowing where it will, and the Son of Man being lifted up as was the serpent in the wilderness. Old Nic was a little confused by the images of second birth from above and the word-play on wind, but as a religious leader he certainly should have been familiar with the story of the bronze serpent lifted up for salvation. As a teacher in Israel, he might even have explored the meaning hidden behind that image. John's gospel tells us that at some point Nicodemus became a disciple. One or all of those images did open up his heart and his mind. One or all of them worked their way through his defenses and captured his center. John doesn't tell us how it happened, only that it did happen. I want to think that this was at least part of his transformation of conversion: Nicodemus was there and saw the Lord lifted up. Looking up at the Lord on that cross, he recognized there the dragon that keeps searing us with its fiery bite and his own participation and complicity in dragon-creation and preservation. Looking on the Lord crucified, Nicodemus finally realized what happens when we believe that violence solves problems, that justice is defined by those with power over against those without power, that force is the same as power, that speaking truth to the System is unacceptable, and that self-giving is only for losers. I want to think that, because I'm convinced that such admission is the first step toward birth from above and new beginnings, the first step toward believing in Jesus (not simply accepting a set of propositions, but believing into following the way of Jesus—the way of non-violent resistance to evil, the way of justice for the poor and disenfranchised, the way of learning and living love, the way of forgiveness as an opening for dead ends. A correct diagnosis is the first step toward healing—we've got to name the dragon that is biting us and confess our own complicity so that we're prepared for the Spirit who blows where He wills.

(Jesus said,) “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up....” Perhaps at this point in our Lenten journey we ought to keep our gaze fixed on a crucifix as a reminder of our participation and complicity in the sin, violence and injustice that dragged Jesus to the cross and that poisons our society. That is, I think, the first step

into the kingdom. It is the “light” that exposes our deeds—it is the antigen for our pathogen. Salvation isn’t about God covering His divine eyes so as not to see our sin but rather about God uncovering our eyes to see how we keep feeding the poisonous serpents that could very well destroy us. Amen.