

## Sermon 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent Year A, March 18, 2012

Who can tell me what this is and represents?

Why does the medical community use snakes on a staff as a logo for healing and where does it come from? This image comes from ancient Greece. It is called the **rod of Asclepius**, also known as the **asklepiant**. It is an ancient symbol associated with astrology, the Greek god Asclepius, and with medicine and healing. It consists of a serpent entwined around a staff. The name of the symbol derives from its widespread association with Asclepius, the son of Apollo, who was a practitioner of medicine in ancient Greek mythology. His attributes, the snake and the staff are combined in this symbol. The serpent and the staff appear to have been separate symbols that were combined at some point in the development of the Asclepian cult. The ambiguity of the serpent as a symbol, and the contradictions it is thought to represent, reflect the ambiguity of the use of drugs, which can help or harm, as reflected in the meaning of the term *pharmakon*, which meant "drug", "medicine" "poison", "charm" or "spell" in ancient Greek. This symbol is not to be confused with the **caduceus** which is the short two serpent staff carried by hermes or mercury as messengers of the gods.

Today in our first reading from Numbers we hear about this symbol. The Lord sent poisonous snakes against the people of Israel for their constant complaining against God. The people spoke against God and Moses saying, *"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."*

Even though the passage reveals God's anger at his people for their griping, God does what he typically does...he has compassion on their weakness and provides a way out for them. As an antidote to the venom of the serpents, God instructs Moses to make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." In Hebrew it is known as the **Nehushtan** a sacred object in the form of a snake of brass on a pole. Scripture says that Moses used a 'fiery serpent' to cure the Israelites from snakebites.

The image of the serpent is prevalent in religious mythologies for thousands of years. Why? The serpent was believed to be an animal that sheds death, it sheds its skin to be reborn and so it is a symbol of death and rebirth. The serpent is fluent moving smoothly in waterways; it is bound to the Earth, but its little flashing tongue is like a flame, so it is as though there was fire in it.—the fire within the water fertilizes and fructifies giving life.

Secondly, and more appropriately for today, the serpent represents sin—our brokenness—our falling short as human beings. Holding the serpent before the people was to hold a mirror to the people to face up to their brokenness and in doing so find healing. If any of you have been in AA or a 12 step program you know step one is to acknowledge your powerlessness against your addiction. In a way the group holds the serpent of alcohol...and when you come face to face with it, you can see how it has been a demon in your life...and healing can begin.

The symbol of the serpent reminds us to face our illnesses and acknowledge our need for healing so it can begin. It's coming face to face with the sin and shortcomings of our life is the beginning of the healing process, of forgiveness and reconciliation.

We all know people who have been sick and refuse to face their illness or go to the doctor and they get worse and worse. They say they'd rather not know. My grandmother was like that and died in part because she refused to go to the doctor early on. Sadly, I think this is also the case with my mom. She knew she wasn't well for sometime, but refused the testing recommended by her primary health care provider nearly 2 years ago. No doctor has ever healed anyone that wasn't ready to acknowledge their need for healing and willingness to be healed.

In our gospel passage like Moses' serpent we are to look at the Son of Man lifted up for our healing. The Son of Man takes on death, sheds death and is reborn into new life bringing all of us with him. By looking at the Lord lifted up on the cross we see the price paid for the brokenness of humanity is now given everlasting life. Like Jesus, we too shed death and are reborn into new life.

So we come today to look upon the Son of Man, to acknowledge our brokenness, our powerlessness and call upon our Lord to heal us in body, mind and spirit.

Look to the tree...see love outpoured for you and me. As we hear in John 3:16, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that we might have everlasting life." This is the good news...even though we fall short, we sin, we are broken in body and spirit we are still loved...deeply loved...all of us...all creation....everybody.

The problem comes in the next verse John 3:17 which says, *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.* The problem in large part is what we've done with it. We've read this passage and put ourselves in the place of God. We've made judgments of who is and who isn't saved. There are people in every religion who are more intent on defining who is IN and who is OUT when it comes to God.

Look what happens in our world when we focus on 3:17 rather than on 3:16...that God loves all the world...we find ourselves at war...we find ourselves at each other....SHE IS RIGHT, HE IS WRONG...CHRISTIANS ARE GOOD, MUSLIMS ARE BAD.

I suggest my friends we do what it says in the readings. Look up at the ONE ON THE TREE. Gaze upward at the one who is all love. Let us look into our hearts and have the courage to see our own brokenness of heart and to seek healing in our own lives. And, when we acknowledge our own brokenness we create the possibility to see love poured out on the cross. We will stop being the judge of others and let that be God's business. Instead we will live in such a way, here and now, that we can heal ourselves and be healing for those we meet.

Look to the tree...see love outpoured for you and for me. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that we might have life. We are loved...you, you, you...and I am loved. Amen.