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Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
March 14, 2021 Streaming Mass
Lent 4th Sunday of Year B John 3:14-21

What does the story of Moses lifting up a bronze snake in the desert have to do with Jesus being raised up on a cross, and more importantly what does all this have to do with us? There are many stories in the Old Testament that at first glance appear really odd, even weird, yet upon reflection often speak very directly to where we find ourselves today. We read in the book of Exodus how the Jews, as they were making their way through the desert from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land, were being bitten by poisonous snakes. Moses then fashions a serpent of bronze, so that when they look at it, they are healed. "Looking at the bronze snake" served as a kind of antidote to the poison, to the venom, that threatened to kill them. Here is the curious part. In ancient times snakes were viewed as symbols of healing. Because a snake outgrows its skin, leaving the old skin behind, as it merges from the old shell, the carapace, the snake was seen as representing a kind of rebirth, a regeneration. The point that the Book of Exodus is making is that when the Hebrews looked at, when they confronted the representation of that very toxic reality that was threatening to kill them, in that very confrontation, they were healed; they were rescued; they were saved.

There was, however, another toxic reality that was threatening to destroy them. The people had begun to lose faith in God, in Moses; they began to doubt they were ever going to get where they were headed. They began to grumble, they started to turn on each other. The poisonous snakes could well represent a growing animosity invading the community, sapping them of the enthusiasm they had at the outset of their journey, and now threatening to turn one against the other. They are biting and infecting each other with a kind of human poison we all know too well. These are the snakes, not lurking in the soil or in the grass, but in the recesses, in the cave of the heart. Theirs is the venom, the toxicity, that can infect our relationships, our interactions, our dealings with each other. This is the poison that can destroy any sense of community we hope to build. Even our ordinary figures of speech betray how this poisonous hate can hurt not only others, but also ourselves. We are warned, "Be careful what you say... it may come around to bite you."

God tells Moses, "Make a poisonous snake, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." If we see the poisonous serpents as human beings full of envy and spite, Moses is asking the people to change their focus by looking at the bronze serpent instead of at each other. This change of focus will break

the spell they seem to be under and force them to examine themselves. They have become each other's poison. They have to recognize that first in order to escape the escalating violence that threatens to destroy their community.

How is Jesus, being lifted up on a cross, like a poisonous snake hanging on a pole? Because He shows us our own poison, something we don't want to look at or see, but must, if we are ever going to find salvation, find healing from that poison. The promise offered to us is that as we look into our hearts, at the source of our antipathies, our envy, our spite, that as we confront honestly and squarely that slippery, scaly, snaky part of ourselves, we can find there the beginnings of healing. When we can face that toxicity within ourselves, when we can see ourselves through the lens of Jesus lifted up on the cross, Jesus who takes upon himself the venomous nature of human beings, not to condemn us but to forgive us, then we have the possibility of our emerging, like the snake from its shell, from the carapace of our former selves. We are, as it were, re-born to a new way of living, a new way of approaching those relationships and interactions. What we hear proclaimed in today's Gospel is that the death of Jesus on the cross is the remedy for humanity's toxicity.

This is the promise of "eternal life" that is being offered to us. Not something that begins only when we die, but right now, when we enter into that kind of life that is grounded in God, when we live not out of fear, but with hope, confidence and joy. And what does it mean "to be saved?" Salvation is essentially "being healed." So we can read today's gospel passage in this way, "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be "healed" through Him." The "world" of which John speaks here is the "world" that human beings have fashioned for themselves (the social construction of reality). It is the poisonous world of exploitation, domination, manipulation, violence and recrimination with which we are all too familiar—a world we are so easily drawn into, sucked into—a "world," at its core which is toxic to the human spirit. It is from the effects of this world that we are saved, rescued, healed. To believe in Jesus is to make that generous love He displayed on the cross the foundation of our lives, insofar as we are able. It is to live free of all that would pull us down into the morass of ego, fear and the need to control.

So when we look at Jesus hanging on the cross, we see, as it were, a placard, some sort of poster, a sign or advertisement, that this is what God is like—not as we might imagine God to be—distant, remote, uninvolved, indifferent to human pain and suffering, but a God who became vulnerable, a God who was broken in a display of generous love. If we can see that God is truly there in Jesus lifted up on the cross, then we can really begin to love as God loves. This is the light that has come into the world. If we believe in that, if we can walk in that light, then we are pulled out of all

the moral sickness that can weigh us down, that can poison us, to possess instead that integrity, that wholeness, that spiritual wellness that is the mark of a child of God. There is always a choice. One can always prefer darkness to light. We can stay stuck in anger, bitterness and hate. We can choose to live in the snake pit. Then, we are not so much punished for our sins, as we are punished by our sins.

In a few moments we will partake of the Eucharist. It is fitting that Jesus should have given this to us as His last testament, for what is the Eucharist but the bread that is broken, as we give thanks for the God who was broken, as we pledge our willingness to be broken in service to our neighbor. So, let the cross be for us not just some good-luck charm, not just a piece of jewelry, but a reminder, a pledge of our determination to walk the same path of vulnerability, of openness, of generosity, so that even now we can taste what "eternal life" is like. Let us pray that we can be "lifted up" from the world of toxic relationships into the circle of divine love, and there find salvation, health of spirit and healing.