For reflection:

Poison is in everything, and no thing is without poison. The dosage makes it either a poison or a remedy.
Paracelsus

Hebrew Scripture: Numbers 21:4-9

Our reading from the Book of Numbers is the final time the Israelites complain to Moses (sin against) about life in the wilderness. This time it is noted for the first time that they also sin against God. Let us listen to the passage.

They marched from Mount Hor on the Reed Sea road around the land of Edom. The people became impatient on the road. The people spoke against God and Moses: “Why did you bring us up from Egypt to kill us in the desert, where there is no food or water. And we detest this miserable bread!” So the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people and they bit the people. Many of the Israelites died. The people went to Moses and said, “We’ve sinned, for we spoke against the Lord and you. Pray to the Lord so that he will send the snakes away from us. So Moses prayed for the people. The Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous snake and place it on a pole. Whoever is bitten, can look at it and live.” Moses made a bronze snake and placed it on a pole. If a snake bit someone, that person could look at the bronze snake and live.

Gospel Reading: John 3:14-21

Our gospel reading today is from John. The scripture cutting hides the fact that this is the second part of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus – the one who came to Jesus in the dark and was stymied by the challenge of being born again. The subsequent conversation isn’t much easier. Let us listen.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human one be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish, but will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him isn’t judged; whoever doesn’t believe in him is already judged, because they don’t believe in the name of God’s only Son. This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil. All who do wicked things hate the light and don’t come to the light for fear that their actions will be exposed to the light. Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God.

Sermon: The Healing Paradox

By now Miriam and Aaron have died and Moses has been informed he'll not be arriving in the Holy Land with the people he has led all this time.

Not even this prevents the Israelites from complaining yet again about life in the wilderness. While forty years gives lots of time to find fault with the journey, the goal, the leadership, the accommodations, finally they cross a line and complain not only against their human leaders but also against God.

As a result, the people encounter snakes with a burning and deadly bite and many do die. The others turn to Moses and ask him to once again intervene with God for their salvation. At God’s direction, Moses crafts a bronze snake and puts it on a pole where everyone can see it. Those who look upon it AND believe that they can be healed by the power of God are healed. The bronze snake is a witness to the healing paradox. The healing is found in the symbol of the very thing that kills.

Interesting, and little noticed in this story, is the fact that the poisonous snakes are not driven away
or killed. Perhaps after all this time, and all the backsliding of the people, even God has realized his human creatures cannot be, will not be reconciled, healed forever. We have no learning curve that means we will never sin again, never speak against God again, never act against God by acting against our neighbors. So God leaves the snakes, the consequences of sin among the people; but the God of love also leaves the means for healing among the people, no matter how repeatedly they need it.

First, of course, one must admit that one is in need of healing. To look upon the bronze snake is not enough. One must acknowledge in the looking that it is God who has the power to heal. Another healing paradox – to be healed, one must partner with the healer – no matter how powerful the healer, the one who does not wish to be healed, does not acknowledge the need to be healed, cannot be healed.

It is possible, of course, to abuse even the symbol of healing. Perhaps it is possible to rely on forgiveness without ever trying to respond in gratitude by sinning less. Perhaps it is possible to take for granted the healing that is available as a matter of course, without thinking about it, without being grateful, without any intention of doing better. Perhaps it is possible to turn the symbol of healing into one more idol praying to it as though it were a god itself, appeased by offerings in whatever form, so that no ill will befall us.

Perhaps. There is a possibility that is exactly what the Israelites eventually did with the bronze snake. Almost a thousand years later, there is an obscure detail in the reporting of the reforms of good King Hezekiah. When he destroyed the idols of other gods, he also destroyed the bronze snake calling it a worthless thing. It’s presence in the company of the idols of other gods suggests the people had over time made an idol of the bronze snake.

If we know this story of one of the many rebellions of the Israelites, it is undoubtedly because of John’s references to it, here and in subsequent chapters – allusions to Jesus being lifted up on the cross, and beyond that, being lifted up in the resurrection. There is more than the physical similarity of the images. For according to John, those who look upon the suffering Christ; those who encounter the power of God in Christ’s resurrection; those who BELIEVE in the transforming power of God’s love will also find new life. In that love, we can discover redemptive forgiveness, hope and possibility beyond our own imagining or doing.

And like the early Israelites, we too need a symbol of God’s love, redemption and healing possibility among us. For like them, we, too, will fall away again and again. No matter how much we love the light, we human creatures will, from time to time, act as though we love the darkness, breaking down human relationships, failing to provide for human dignity or mercy or justice, failing to give to God what is God’s due, bringing little bits of death to human spirits – our own and those of the ones around us. And when we are being killed by the snakebite of shame or guilt, disrupted society, despair or lack of hope, we too need a symbol to remind us that the one who made us human has the power to heal our human brokenness.

Like the Israelites and that bronze snake, it is possible for us to abuse the symbols of God’s suffering with us and for us, the symbol of Christ’s resurrection, by taking them for granted, by using them as charms against bad things befalling us, by allowing doubt or life’s circumstances to cloud our belief that God has the power to heal us. We too can refuse to acknowledge we need to repent and turn a different way. We can refuse to acknowledge that we need to be healed; that we need to be forgiven; that we need help in living a different way. We can refuse to believe that we can be changed. We can refuse to be partners in our own healing and encounter once again the healing paradox. Those who will not be healed cannot be healed.

The cross, both bearing Christ’s body and empty to the sky, represents perhaps that is the greatest paradox of all – a love that can endure even our rejection, our refusal to look, our inability to believe. For even if that is the road we choose – rejecting the word of the Lord which, from beginning to end, shows us a God whose loving purpose is always healing – even then – the one who came for love of the world; the one who came to look upon the world with discerning judgement, but not judgmental condemnation, still chooses to stand among us offering healing to all who seek it, whenever we turn toward the light of the Lord, no matter how many times we have turned away before. May it be that this Lent, we allow ourselves to be embraced by that enduring love, that we can be healed according to God’s good intentions.