

Numbers 21:4-9  
Psalm 107:1-3.17-22  
Ephesians 2:1-10  
JOHN 3:14-21

## HEALING THEN, NOW and FOREVER

I have in my hand the wallet-sized card which the Kendall Park First Aid and Rescue Squad distributes to interested residents on which they can write down emergency numbers, the phone numbers of their doctors, any medications they are taking and any medications to which they are allergic. This is an especially helpful card to carry with you if you have a chronic medical condition, of which emergency personnel should be aware, especially if you are not able to speak coherently when they are first treating you.

I bring this up today because of the symbol which is on this card, which is also emblazoned on KPFARS ambulances and many other ambulances: the symbol of a snake wrapped around a pole superimposed on a six-pointed cross. It's a symbol of the medical professions which may be familiar enough that we may not look at it closely or realize the sources of this symbol of healing.

The sources of this symbol are the Old Testament reading and the Gospel for this morning.

During their long journey through the wilderness of Sinai from slavery amid abundance in Egypt to a new homeland in the Holy Land, the Israelites were repeatedly blessed by God and they repeatedly showed how they, like many people, had very short memories when it came to their blessings. The Israelites were spared by God from the plagues with which he afflicted their Egyptian enslavers, liberated by God from the grip of the Egyptian King, saved by God at the water's edge from the mightiest army then on earth, and delivered to freedom in Sinai. In the rocky, arid Sinai Peninsula, God guided them to springs of water, to oases, and provided manna and poultry for them to eat. God appointed a vigorous and incorruptible leader in Moses and blessed them with the 10 commandments as the foundation of their moral and civil law.

Yet, just like many other people since, again and again, the Israelites complained "What have you done for us *lately*?"

God got ticked off and periodically punished those who were most rebellious and stubbornly begrudged his generosity. One example recorded in the book of Numbers was a plague of poisonous snakes, which abated after people confessed their sin and asked God for forgiveness. God then commanded Moses to set one of the snakes on a pole and said to him, “‘Everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.’ So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it on a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.”

The bronze serpent on a pole became a tangible and visible symbol of God’s healing presence among God’s people. People need tangible and visible symbols of the presence of God who is an invisible, spiritual being beyond all time and space. The Bible, the seven sacraments, church buildings, altars, baptismal fonts, the cross and sometimes even clergy and other individual Christians can be seen as tangible and visible signs of the presence of God in the midst of God’s people. Such signs, however, come with the risk that some people will venerate the signs and symbols too much rather than the invisible God who they serve. That eventually happened with the bronze serpent on a pole which Moses lifted up; it became a temptation in later centuries for idolatry, and was destroyed.

Healing by God is a persistent theme in the Bible. The Old Testament alone (despite its somewhat fearsome reputation) has 73 different references which are translated by some variant of the English word “to heal”, including the succinct and memorable Exodus 15:26: “I am the Lord who heals you.”

The much shorter New Testament has more references translated as “healing”, and healing – physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, relational healing – was a major motif in Jesus’ earthly ministry, as we have heard in many of our Gospel stories in 2009. But the fact is that even those healed most dramatically by Jesus, like Lazarus, who was raised from the dead, have since died. Jesus then and now embraces healing here and now but also takes healing to another level.

We hear about this in today’s Gospel, in the sentence which serves as the introduction to John 3:16, one of the most famous verses in the Bible. “Jesus said, ‘Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.’”

The healing Jesus is talking about here is **ultimate healing**: life beyond this life, “life where there is no pain or sorrow,” life fully and completely healed and lasting forever in the presence of God.

So, let me say three things about healing. First, the church sees a profound connection between medical healing and spiritual healing, between prayer and prescriptions, anointing for healing and doctors and nurses, hospitals and spiritual

support and love. St. Luke himself, patron saint of Christian healing and author of the Third Gospel, was a doctor. Unlike Christian Science (which is neither Christian nor science), Christians do not have to choose between science-based medicine and faith. We are all in this together. God created the minds that can conceive of and the hands which can deliver medical break-through just as surely as God puts it in our hearts to pray. The symbol on ambulances is the clearest indication of the *intertwining* of medical and spiritual healing I can think of.

Second, God is profoundly interested in bettering our lives in the here-and-now, including by offering one kind of healing or another, quickly or slowly, in an obvious way or in a subtle, “anonymous” way.

And finally, whatever kinds of healing we may or may not experience in this life, we all need the ultimate healing of heaven. Sometimes we can have a foretaste of that in serenity, peace, the closeness of loving family and very close friends and the gentle presence of God which may be tangibly, visibly present, including as some people pass from this world to the next. But whatever the manner of one’s dying and death, by *the grace of God* so wonderfully described in today’s Epistle, we may have eternal life, because “God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son.”

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