

The Extraordinary Form of God's Salvation
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, April 7, 2019
Based on Numbers 21:4–9; II Kings 18:1, 3–4; John 3:13–16

Do you like snakes? Some people must like snakes, because you can buy them in pet stores. When our boys were young, Mavis and I let them get lizards for pets, but not snakes. Human beings have not had a good relationship with snakes through the centuries, and an example of that is found in the Scripture story that we heard from the book of Numbers.

The people of Israel, as they were journeying through the wilderness, encountered a bunch of poisonous snakes, literally called “fiery serpents” in the original Hebrew. Prior to this, the people had been complaining against God, something that they did on multiple occasions during their sojourn in the wilderness. They complained about all their discomforts and hardships, and they complained about the food. *[The people spoke against God and against Moses, “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. Numbers 21:5]* Then they started to get bit by all these snakes, which they interpreted as God’s judgment on them for their lack of faith and their complaining. *[Fiery serpents bit the people, so that many Israelites died. Numbers 21:6]* God probably did not need to actually send snakes among them—there were plenty of snakes around already—but the people realized that as long as they were alienated from God, things were not going to go well, and they were defenseless against all these serpents. So they came to Moses, confessing their sin and asking for help. *[The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” Numbers 21:7]*

God instructed Moses to create a pole with a bronze serpent wrapped around it. He was to lift up the pole, and when the people looked upon it, they would be healed of any bite of a serpent. *[The Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. Numbers 21:8–9]* It was an extraordinary symbol—the very thing that was the source of their anguish and destruction, the serpent, would become the medium by which God’s healing would flow. The people for their part were called to repent—to turn from sin and turn toward God, and trust in God for deliverance.

Later, the Greeks developed a couple of legends involving snakes around poles, which gave shape to the current medical symbol. In Greek culture, snake venom was milked and used to make medicines or antidotes, and the fact that snakes shed their skin was seen as an image of rejuvenation, and so there was a natural association of the snake with healing. But for the Hebrew people getting bitten by snakes in the

wilderness, there was not the least bit of association of the snake with healing. In that setting, they were clear that the healing they needed would come from God. When the serpent on the pole was lifted up, they looked up to trust in God.

Centuries thereafter, however, they began to think of the pole itself as being a source of healing. In the days of King Hezekiah of Judah, who lived more than five hundred years after Moses, the people of Israel still had that pole with the bronze serpent and had it set up in a place of worship, perhaps in the court of the temple itself. But over the years, the people had been sliding into the pagan worship practices of their neighbors, worshipping at sacred spots, trusting in other gods, and praying in front of statues, and they started worshipping the pole as an idol, giving it the name Nehushtan, a name derived from the Hebrew words for “bronze” and “serpent.” *[In those days the people of Israel made offerings to the bronze serpent that Moses had made; it was called Nehushtan. II Kings 18:4b]* Hezekiah, who was a good and faithful king, busted the thing up into pieces. *[Hezekiah broke the bronze serpent in pieces. II Kings 18:4a]* That was the end of that.

You don’t hear any more about it until Jesus, in the passage we heard from the gospel of John, hearkened back to the original story and said, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man [by which Jesus referred to himself] must be lifted up . . . so that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:14,16) No one made sense of that statement until after the crucifixion. Jesus was lifted up, on the cross, in order that we might be delivered from sin and death.

This is one of many cases where a theme outlined in the Old Testament reaches an extraordinary fulfillment in the New. When the people in the wilderness looked at that pole held up by Moses, they saw a representation of what was threatening them. Today when we look at Jesus suffering on the cross, we see a powerful representation of everything that threatens us. We see the hatred and cruelty of humanity directed in full measure at Jesus. We see the brokenness of the world, received by Jesus onto himself. We see physical pain and spiritual anguish, felt by Jesus to the greatest degree. And we see death in all its gruesome reality. On the cross, the terrifying power of destruction is lifted up on a pole— just as, in a lesser but foreshadowing way, the serpent was lifted up on the pole in the wilderness.

But destruction is not the final word. For the people of Israel along with Moses, and for the disciples in the shadow of the cross, the power of destruction is broken by the saving action of God. In the wilderness, the venom of the serpents suddenly could no longer cause harm; and because of what Jesus has done on the cross, sin and death lose their power over us. As the apostle Paul would later say, “O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!” (I Corinthians 15:55,57)

So the cross, like the serpent on the pole, becomes finally a sign not of death but of salvation. The cross works for our salvation, however, not in a magical way. The people of Israel in later years turned the serpent on the pole into a kind of good luck charm; and people do the same at times today with the cross. But the saving power of God takes hold as people genuinely respond to God in faith. Like the people of ancient Israel, we are called to repentance—to turn afresh toward God, to take hold of the gracious love that God now is offering to us through Christ. It is precisely to such faith that Jesus was calling his hearers when he said, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” (John 3:14–15)

In this regard, the image of Christ being lifted up actually signifies several things. It signifies, first of all, as we have noted, the fact that Christ was lifted up on the cross as he gave his life for us. But as Christ won the victory over sin and death, he was lifted up in another profound way—in the resurrection and the ascension—as he rose from the grave and finally ascended into heaven. And then Christ is lifted up in yet another very important way, as he is lifted up in the hearts of believers, whenever they give to Christ their praise and devotion. We “lift up Christ” in every service of worship.

The image of uplift is then carried forward in the idea that believers themselves are lifted up by Christ. We are lifted out of brokenness and hopelessness and despair, lifted finally out of death—by the saving power of Christ. As Jesus later said, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.” (John 12:32)

You may feel that you could use some uplift in the midst of today’s world! When surrounded by the fiery serpents of our own time, human beings are often inclined, like the people of ancient Israel, to either despair or complain. But the story of the serpents and the story of the cross demonstrate how God is at work with deliverance, and how God works in a remarkably transformative way. It is significant that in the wilderness God did not destroy all the snakes but gave the people immunity to the venom. On the cross, Jesus does not destroy death, but frees us from its power. So the very image of death and destruction—the snake or the cross—becomes transformed in the end into an image of redemption; because out of trouble God brings about healing and hope.

It all speaks profoundly to us today whenever we are facing serious trouble or disappointment or loss, or whenever the problems of life seem insurmountable. The message of the serpent on the pole, and the greater message of the cross, is that God does far more than simply bring about an escape from the trouble at hand. God transforms the whole picture. God works in such a way that out of destruction and death people are drawn into faith, and a pathway is created by God’s grace into life. We see this already in the serpent on the pole, and we see it ultimately on the cross, as Jesus opens the way for us through pain and death into new and everlasting life.

Today, in the country of Jordan, you can go to Mount Nebo to the spot where Moses was standing at the end of his life, from where he could see the Promised Land

in the distance. He got to that spot because God had long since delivered the people from the serpents, and he was able to see the future destiny of the people of Israel. On that very spot today there is a large sculpture made by an Italian artist. It is a sculpture of the serpent wrapped around a pole. But it is no longer just a pole; it has the form of a cross, and underneath is inscribed the Scripture: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." (John 3:14–15)

It is an inspiring depiction of the salvation story. Just as God brought the people of Israel through a wilderness of trouble to the Promised Land, so now through Christ God would bring all people toward God's eternal promises. We may be confronted in our own time by serious threats, but God provides the everlasting remedy in the cross. As we look up to the cross, and put our faith in Christ, we can know that God is at work right now for our eternal good, and we can take hold of the words of Jesus as he said: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have everlasting life." (John 3:16)