

Lent 4—March 10, 2024

Text: John 3:14-21

Theme: Jesus surpasses Hermes

Sometimes it is amusing when secular groups claim Christian symbols for their own. The obvious one is the rainbow which was claimed by the LGBTQ community when we know the rainbow has nothing at all to do with sexual orientation or gender identity.

Another great example is the caduceus. The caduceus is the winged staff with two snakes wrapped around it that has become a symbol for the medical community. If I were to say that the caduceus came from the story in our Old Testament reading for today, someone would quickly remind me that the caduceus was the staff used by the Greek god Hermes. Nooooooo, the Greeks used the image from the story of Moses in the wilderness with the fiery serpents. The Exodus account predates human being's invention of the god Hermes. From the image of Moses holding up the bronze serpent on the pole, the Greeks had Hermes carry a similar staff but that does not show up until some 1,400 years later in the 4th Century BC. As Bishop Pittelko often warned, "Always remember who stole what from whom!"

The caduceus is a Christian symbol representing the healing work of God in our lives. He heals us even though we still experience the pain associated with living in a broken world and that is not

God's fault. We broke it. Doctors rightly wear this symbol as the instruments of God who brings us healing through their hands. But of course, no matter how great a doctor is, she cannot stop physical death. The best she can do is push it off for a bit. And finally, no doctor can stop spiritual death. Even with all the amazing resources of modern medicine, there is no medical treatment for spiritual death.

Likewise, while the serpent on the pole could stop the Israelites from physically dying, again, it could do nothing for spiritual death. But, then came Jesus. In our Gospel text for today, he said,

"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." It is that matter of fact. Whoever has faith in the Son of God who was lifted up on the pole shall not only live through the irritations and pains of this life, but far more importantly, we will live eternally with perfected resurrected bodies. Focus on that! We have a tendency to focus all our attention on the fiery serpents in our lives on any given day. I have this or that affliction. People are dying in this or that war. People are hungry here or there. All of that is most definitely work for us to do – so do it and stop grouching about it. Either it will be resolved or it won't, but it's not all that

important in the grand scheme of things. Look to the Lord of Life for what is important: eternal life! That is our focus.

If I can help you in some way, I am called to do whatever I can for you, but your physical, psychological, emotional needs always take a backseat to your spiritual needs. If your spiritual needs are met, everything else will be fine...eventually. I know the fiery serpents still bite and I know they are painful. But as you look at our caduceus, Christ hanging from a pole for our sins, remember that He will deliver you through every trial and He will see you into the Promised Land.

Knowing that Christ was lifted up on the cross for us, frees us to be the hands and feet of Christ for others. I don't have to worry about my salvation. I also don't have to worry about my life on earth. Christ will lead me to where He needs me and, as I keep my faith well fed, He will show me what to do. That's the key: Keep your faith well fed. If you are not hearing God speak to you, then you're not listening. Open His Word and listen. He is there all the time. If you are reading His Word every day and receiving the Lord's Supper every week, and you still cannot hear Him, come see me and I will help you figure out where the blockage is because I guarantee you that He is speaking and if you're not hearing, there is something wrong on your end.

It is not unusual for us to have blockages. Sometimes it is our stubborn pride. I don't want to change what I'm doing or how I'm living so I stick my fingers in my ears and swear God is not speaking. Sometimes it is a sin for which we have not forgiven ourselves or someone else. I don't want to hear God because I already know He is going to tell me that holding a grudge is not an option. Whether it is a grudge against myself or someone else, I have no option but to forgive as I have been forgiven. Sometimes it is arrogance. While I would never be so crass as to say it out loud, at some level I believe that I know better than my pastor, my bishop and even my God. Whatever it is, that is causing the blockage between you and God's Word, go back to the Old Testament and imagine that you have just been bitten by a fiery serpent. It hurts tremendously and you are surely going to die if you do not look at the bronze serpent on the pole. Are you going to look at it?

Of course, you are! Why wouldn't you? It is the same now. You have been bitten. I don't always know what your particular serpent is, but I am certain that we have all been bitten before. It hurts! What do we do? We look to Christ, raised up on the cross and know two things. One is that He has promised to be with us through everything, "and lo, I am with you always, even to the very end of the age." Two is that you have already been eternally healed, just

look to the cross upon which our Savior hangs and know that you have already been healed of every malady, every sickness, every trouble, every fear. You may have to wait until all the realities of that healing are yours, but you are nevertheless already healed. You are healed of everything right now and on the day you enter Heaven, that will become fully real for you.