

St Pius & St Anthony 4th Sunday Lent Year B2

A favorite story of mine, is told about a man who was so stressed out, and was daily getting more stressed out by his work/home/family issues, so he went to get counsel from his priest. He said, "Something has to happen, I feel like I'm going crazy." So, the priest said, "Get a dog". So, he did and kids liked the dog too, but they didn't keep up, after him very well, and the dad noticed the kids get more ramped up and rowdy than without the dog (very little quiet in house), so on the next visit airing out his anxiety to the priest, he suggested the man get another dog, and a cat too. As expected the dog gave the other dog company, the kids calmed some but the cat agitated the dogs, and led them to hover around everyone's feet in and out of the kitchen, which added tension to everything. As the man and priest talked again, the priest suggested, maybe one more small addition, maybe a couple ferrets, or a bunny in the family. So, the man tried that and came back completely exasperated at his next visit. The priest told him, "Okay it is time, for you to do something drastic; go home and turn all of those animals over to your neighbor." The man hesitantly did so, and on next visit the priest barely got out the words, "How are you doing?", when the man burst in saying, "We have our best life ever- like heaven, the kids get along, my wife and I rediscovered each other and there's once again peace in the home."

I am using that silly story this morning, because it illustrates an example of how sometimes what first leads to chaos, can then bring calm in the end. And I think it provides an approach to understanding the otherwise perplexing reference Jesus makes about Moses and that bronze serpent God had him raise up in the desert. What happened back then? Numbers 21:4-9 tells the intriguing back-story Jesus is referring to: Moses raises up a bronze serpent on a pole in the center of the camp, and anyone suffering affliction from a snake bite will be healed by looking at it. Jesus then says, similarly, the 'Son of Man will be lifted up' (Jn 3:14) to give/bring life to many. On one level, it is as simple as saying, that what was a bad thing, God used to bring about good, better or much greater thing -a once biting poisonous snake can become a soothing/healing remedy in the end.

But maybe I should say more about this, so curious, an occurring story in the Old Testament Book of Numbers (Numbers 21:4-9). The people of God were having a hard time, struggling in the desert and growing bitter with God. They were frustrated over food-so picky about their provisions (Numbers 21:5 even says 'disgust with God'), so I think they were setting themselves up for a fall, when they run into a patch of desert infested with poisonous snakes, and suddenly they found themselves suffering big time, harassed by snakes-terrorized

by serpents. So, they cry out, going to Moses and God asking for relief! And of course, our good & merciful God hears their prayer, advising Moses to construct a remedy out of a snake itself (take a serpent, impale it on stick and raise it up – anyone looking at it were instantly healed--which they say is the origin of the medical symbol of snake on a stick-or Barber's turning pole or Caduceus symbol which is two snakes rising with wings atop the pole seen on ambulances and paramedic's patches). So, God makes a raised serpent become healing remedy.

(Bear with me for a moment, but on an entirely symbolic level, this is on a completely imaginative level--this serpent episode which at first causes suffering and then is used to heal--represents the ingratitude of the Hebrews: their rejection of God thru complaints & their own backbiting or hand-biting against God (like 'nip nip nip' of a harassing pest) reflects their inconstancy, faithlessness-- their swishing back and forth-themselves, like serpent's sliding sideways movement on the sand). So God needs to turn their focus upward, away from their ground-bound bend stuck on material concerns that led them to reject God's direction. The solution was to face up, one's own contribution to the problem and re-orient one's focus upward (God-ward or sky-ward) and to rise above one's petty selfishness, or to get through one's self-inflicted suffering by stepping up.)

So, by bringing this Moses-Snake episode up, Jesus is saying that his being raised up, which is a seemingly bad thing because it means suffering/dying on cross, is going to bring about tremendous good – salvation for many – which is a certain good thing! A source of suffering becomes a source of salvation! What was great harm, becomes great healing! Jesus's death on cross and our facing it – looking at it – brings us healing, comfort and the prescription to survive death.

But an understandable reaction here is: Go figure! How does something bad become something good, something that harms us suddenly heal us (how would God turn a stinging snake bite into a soothing remedy?) But, there are events in our experience that hint at such turnarounds. Like how, what might at first deliver a blow to us, later deliver us a blessing. Think of how adversity strengthens a person, and an obstacle stimulates a rebound – to states even better than before it.

Here is an interesting example. A poisonous snake is used to create an antidote to its own bite. Their own venom is used to devise anti-venoms. I understand they often use horses a lot to create snake specific antibodies exposing their immune systems to increasing amounts of venom to create and harvest healing antibodies from them. And neatest of all, in Australia at least, they use retired thoroughbreds, to create the lifesaving antivenom – so this work gives the 'put out to pasture' horses a second life too! Antivenom's use is certainly proof that 'what created the wound, is also required to heal the wound' Or another example how what first caused the problem can become part of its own solution, is how forest rangers extinguish fires by incorporating fire itself in

their attack strategy. Fire with fire – Start a back fire to create a break and rob fuel from the big fire to prevent its advance, and causing it to burnout. Or I recall as a child the example of using cold to combat cold. After playing way too long outside with older, better wrapped up cousins, I noticed painfully near-frostbit-chilled fingers, and as I went to the faucet to start flooding them with ‘hot water’, he yelled at me, “Absolutely not, don’t turn that HOT water on. No, that will shock and damage your skin tissue worse. Let’s run you under the cold water first and bring your ‘skin-feeling’ back up slowly by adjusting the cold water upwardly and gradually. So there, *cold overcomes cold!* What normally harms us, can end up healing us. So, the pain-causing serpent on the pole, became the healing remedy in the time of Moses. And Jesus tapped into that imagery and experience to teach us that his otherwise tragic and painful death on the cross (and the guilt of our putting him there) can become for us our helpful and saving prescription to avoid eternal judgement and death. Or put more positively, Jesus’ acceptance of cross and being lifted up, leads us to ***look upward and keep turning again to God*** to be healed and receive (not death) but life eternal. It is about facing up to Jesus lifted on the cross, can lead us out, away from sin. I love how we Catholics have such a devotion to gazing at a crucifix and seeing Jesus’ loving acceptance of all that pain out of love for us. It strengthens us, but more, it comforts/heals us in our trials,