

14 September 2026
Holy Cross Day

Concordia University
Mequon, WI

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“The Holy Pole, the Holy Cross”
Text: Numbers 21:4-9

In the Name of (+) Jesus. Amen.

The Lord did not send serpents to punish His people but to save them. For long before these fiery serpents came into their camp, they had been bitten by another one - that serpent you know as satan, who injected the poison of unbelief into them. And that poison was killing them - not physically, but worse! Spiritually. Faith was replaced with doubt, contentment with grumbling, and love with bitterness. So they grumbled and ***spoke against God and against Moses***, and they were in danger. Of a death worse than physical death; eternal death.

So the Lord, in love, sent fiery serpents among them, to save them. He didn't have to. He could have let them continue to grumble, continue to die, and go back to Egypt and slavery there. But God had made a promise - right after the first time the satanic serpent struck and injected the poison of unbelief into our first parents. The promise of a Saviour. A Saviour who would come from these very people who were now speaking against Him. So He *would* not let them go. He *could* not let them go. He would save them. Not because they were worthy, but because of His Word.

So He sent the fiery serpents, to save them. So that having no where else to turn, they would turn - or re-turn - to Him, and live. With serpents on the left and serpents on the right, with serpents in front of them and behind them, they pleaded with Moses, ***Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us***. He did. But the funny thing is, we never hear if the Lord did that or not. Whether He took away the serpents or not. Instead, He saved another way. What some might consider a most unusual way. *But not for God*. Because it was with His promise in mind, His promise of a Saviour, and how He was going to fulfill that promise, that the Lord told Moses to ***make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole***. So that everyone who was bitten, but who then looked upon that serpent on a pole, would live. Not because it would magically do so, but because the Word and promise of God was there.

And it worked. God's Word and promise gave life to His people. From *both kinds of serpents* - the physical ones and the spiritual one. Saving them from both physical death and spiritual death.

It was not until some 1500 years later that God made plain why He had chosen such a salvation for His people. Such a strange way of saving them. That it was a picture, a foreshadowing of His even greater saving. For as Jesus would tell Nicodemus, *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* (John 3:14-15). Not that lifting up Jesus on a cross was in imitation of the bronze serpent - the bronze serpent lifted up on a pole was in imitation of Him. So that all of us who have been bitten by the satanic serpent, might have eternal life. Both physically and spiritually. In both body and soul. Not because just looking at a dying man on a cross can do that. The Romans crucified thousands like that, and none of them could give life! But because this one had God's Word and promise. Because this one WAS God's Word and promise in human flesh! The promised Saviour, the Son of God, come to save. So that looking to Him in faith, faith in God's Word and promise, faith that His bearing our sins and dying for them gives us life, we receive that very life we need. From the only one who can give it.

Which I think we sometimes take for granted - *life*. Our physical life and maybe also our spiritual life. Until we can't. Until something happens in your life. Until a loved one dies or is diagnosed with a terminal disease. Until a couple who assumed they would have children, can't. Until you're faced with a crisis and don't know where to turn. And we realize how precious - and fragile - life is.

In the Scripture we heard today, we heard how God worked through Moses to give life to His people. He could have just miraculously made the serpents go away, but He chose to use His servant. Today is the same. God can - and does - work miracles. But He works through others as well, in all sorts of vocations - professors to teach, food service to provide our daily bread, using pastors for our spiritual needs, and for our physical needs using the medical professions.

The medical professions, which interestingly, has a symbol called a *caduceus* - which is two serpents wrapped around a pole. Though sometimes it is a single serpent. If you ask AI, it will tell you the Scripture heard today has nothing to do with that. *Nothing!* That symbol came about in a whole separate way and any similarity is pure coincidence. Really? I find that wishful thinking by those who don't *want* this story to have anything to do with it! But either way, whatever the official evolution of that symbol, it still can remind us today of this story and that our healing and life come from the Lord. And the one with the two serpents is even *better* - reminding us of *both* the serpents that had bitten the people of Israel - the physical ones and the spiritual one - and that our physical life and spiritual life both come from God.

I'm told that this is "Mental Health Awareness Week" here on campus, and there are lots of activities to go with that. That's good. You have a lot going on in your lives

and might find yourself struggling. The serpents of stress, anxiety, despair, doubt, even suicidal thoughts might be squirming all around you. Don't ignore them. As Israel cried out to Moses for help, call out to those God has given you to help. Your RA, Student Health Services, Professors, even the 988 suicide hotline. There is no shame in that. But also remember this: those TWO serpents on the caduceus, which I say represent the physical *and* the spiritual aspects of healing and life. So when you are struggling, don't just seek physical help - seek also the spiritual help you need. The two go together. Call out to your pastor, or your campus pastor, for help. God gave them to you for just this reason. And I can tell you (if you don't know it yet), you have a awesome campus pastor who will be there for you.

And He will do what Moses did for the people - He will hold up for you the source of your life in the midst of the serpents plaguing you. He will proclaim the words and promises God put there for you, and the words and promises of the cross He put here for you. He will feed you with the Bread of Life. He will forgive you in the stead and by the command of Christ. The serpents may not go away. You may still struggle for a while. But you will not be alone. The God who created you, who redeemed you, who sanctifies you, and who gives you life, will be with you through His servants. And He will bless you and keep you until you enter *your* Promised Land and life with Him that has no end. And . . . *with no serpents!*

In the Name of (+) Jesus. Amen.