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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Lent 4
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, it is a strange symbol.

The symbol of the medical profession is a strange symbol.

The symbol is called the “caduceus.”

The “caduceus,” which is a staff around which two snakes are intertwined.

Strange, right?

The staff with a single snake or with two snakes has long been a symbol of medicine and the medical profession.

And, its apparent origin is from the story of Asclepius (uh-sklee-pee-us) who was revered by the ancient Greeks as a god of healing and whose cult involved the use of snakes.

Now, some accounts suggest that the oldest known imagery of the caduceus comes from Mesopotamia in relation to the Sumerian god Ningishzida and dates back to 4000 to 3000 BC.

But who knows?

The exact origins of the caduceus—the where, when, and how it emerged, seem obscured in the mists of time.

But, what is interesting is that the Bible provides still another account for the origin of the caduceus.

In the book of Numbers, we read that the Israelites are journeying from the Red Sea to the land of Edom.

And the Israelites, like so many children on long car rides, are complaining as they make their journey.

Are we there yet? How much further? I'm hungry. I have to use the bathroom.

You get the picture.

The Israelites are journeying to Edom and they are complaining about why they couldn't have stayed in Egypt.

And they are complaining about having no water.

And they are complaining that they detest the miserable food.

And so, poisonous serpents are set against them, and the Israelites are bit, and some of them died.

In response to the snakes, the Israelites confess that they have sinned against the Lord, and they ask Moses their leader to pray to the Lord to take the serpents away from them.

And the Lord tells Moses then to fashion a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten and who looks at this pole will live.

And so, this is what Moses does.

PAUSE

And interestingly enough, Jesus references this story in our Gospel reading today.

Jesus says, "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."

Now, when Jesus says the Son of Man must be lifted up, he is referring of course to his crucifixion.

Jesus is lifted up on the cross.

PAUSE

But sisters and brothers in Christ, what exactly are we really talking about here?

What are we talking about when we say that the caduceus is used as the symbol of the medical profession?

And what are we talking about when we say that Moses lifted up a serpent on a pole so that those who had been bitten by snakes might look at the pole and live?

And what are we talking about when we hear Jesus say that the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life?

What are we talking about but healing, about being restored to health.

Yes, whether we are talking about the caduceus of the medical profession, or the serpent Moses put on a pole, or Jesus who died on the cross...

What we are talking about is healing.

We are talking about being made whole again.

We are talking about being made well.

We are talking about healing.

Indeed, the Bible is a book about healing.

From the first few pages of Genesis to the closing verses of Revelation, the Bible is about how we may be made well.

Those who practice medicine may have their books, that cover internal medicine, medical diseases, and diagnoses, and so on...

Those who practice medicine may have certain resources on the shelves of their offices, to which they turn.

But as Christians the Bible is our resource for healing.

I am not saying that as Christian people we jettison the practice of medical science...that they have theirs and we have ours...

I am not saying that we should rely solely on the Bible to give us the answers to our physical infirmities.

No, that is not what I am saying at all.

We need doctors and nurses and therapists, and hospitals and rehab centers, the like...

We need all of those persons and institutions to tend to our physical and mental well-being.

We have especially seen how much we need them during this pandemic.

But when it comes to our spiritual healing, well that is where the Bible, and the church, and worship and prayer come in.

And the Holy Bible diagnoses the human problem in the first few chapters of Genesis.

Humanity, Adam and Eve, had lived in right relationship with God.

And then sin entered the world because Adam and Eve were deceived by the serpent in the Garden.

Adam and Eve listened to the serpent and had subsequently ignored the mandate from God not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Adam and Eve were tempted by the serpent and so they disobeyed God, and sin came into the world, sin has proven to be its own pandemic since time immemorial.

And all the rest of the Bible is about how God is trying to heal humanity.

First God tries to deal with sin with a flood.

Then God tries to deal with sin with the Ten Commandments.

God tries various means to rid the sin that has infected humanity.

God has diagnosed the problem, sin has infected us.

Only the treatment for that which ails us is not easy to come by.

The Flood doesn't work.

And, the Ten Commandments only reveal the sin in humanity all the more.

No, the treatment for sin isn't easy to come by.

It is not like we can take scalpel and surgically remove sin.

Nor we can take a prescription to cure our sin-sick souls.

Take two of these and call me in the morning.

It is not like can do physical therapy, or get radiation treatments, or go on dialysis, and be cured of sin.

No, sin is not like some other medical diagnosis.

Sin affects our whole being—mind, body, and soul.

And as much as we might want to cure ourselves, the truth of the matter is...there is nothing that can be done from our end to make us whole.

But thanks be to God, that God does not leave us to fester in our human sinful condition.

God does abandon us to succumb to this dreadful disease.

No, God recognizes that which ails us and God realizes that ultimately only God can heal us.

And God himself comes to bring healing and hope. This is what our Lenten journey is about—the cure for the pandemic of sin.

Now, you might say, “Funny, my body hasn’t improved any.”

Even though you, Pastor, say God has come to bring us healing.

Funny, I am still struggling with the same aches and pains.

Funny, I am still coping with the effects of aging.

Funny, I am still having to see my doctor for this or that problem.

Yes, you might respond saying, “Funny, I don’t feel like I am experience healing.”

PAUSE

And so let me spell it out for us. Let me break it down for us.

Let me elaborate, elucidate, clarify, illuminate, and in no uncertain terms explain this healing that God’s brings.

For we see, again, we are not talking about physical or mental healing.

No, we are talking about our spiritual selves that are healed by the grace of God.

We are talking about being healed of guilt and shame.

We are talking about being healed of greed and avarice.

We are talking about being healed of hate and animosity.

Of lust and envy. Of arrogance and pride.

Of gluttony and excess. Of self-doubt and self-loathing.

Of fear and grief. Of sadness and despair.

Of impurity and idolatry. So on, and so on, and so on.

Sin manifests in any number of ways in our lives, and usually in multiple ways.

These are the ills that infect us.

And these ills cannot be remedied by the powers of medicine.

Only God can heal us, so that we are made a new creation.

But how does that healing work? How does God bring about a new creation in here?

Healing happens by our having died to sin with Christ on the cross, and having been raised to new life with Christ on Easter.

This is what faith means finally.

Faith is not so much stating a premise, "I believe Jesus is my Lord and Savior."

Faith is a way of living. It is about living life dead to sin and alive in Christ.

For if sin has infected every part of our being, our mind, our body, and soul, then the only way to deal with sin is to die with Christ and become a new creation.

That is what our baptism is about. Baptism is about dying in those waters.

And it is about subsequently living a new existence because God promises us in Christ to make us new.

Spiritually we are made alive through baptism, even if physically in our bodies we are still mortals, with the physical infirmities and everything else that goes along with having a body.

We have to die to heal spiritually. We have to die to be free from sin.

We have to die to experience a new creation. Just as Jesus had to die in order to bring us and all creation the promise of new life.

It is like the truth in the medical field that in order to bring healing, sometimes you need to do surgery, to cut open the body or proscribe treatments that bring tribulation to the body.

That is the irony sometimes.

And that is the strange irony of Lent.

We are journeying in Lent to of all places—a cross.

If we were rational human beings we would be running in the opposite direction away from the cross.

The cross has been a cruel means of execution, it is a place of humiliation and death.

But this is where we journey, because on the other side of that cross is the resurrection.

Yes, the caduceus is a strange sign of healing.

A staff with two snakes intertwined.

But the cross is an even stranger sign of healing.

But it reminds us that our healing in this world and in the world to come starts by Christ's death, and our death with him.

Only by dying can we hope to live. Amen.