Snake on a Stick Lent 4B St Brendans Deer Isle March 14 2021.

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved.

The Lord be with you. **And also with you**. Let us pray. God of Salvation, God of healing, we come to you in great gratitude for the ways in which you feed us and care for us and heal us in these days of Lent. Thank you especially for your Word in scripture that we have just received. What is it if not the very bread of life for us. So may we taste it today, chew on it, digest it, and let it strengthen us to do the good to others that you have planned for us to do. Thank you even more for the Living Word, Jesus Christ, our great Physician when we really need one. Lift him up before us now and always, so that in looking on him we may discover the new life he has for us, forgiven, healed, and free to love. And so may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord of hosts.

Holy God you make us happy When you bless this Holy Lent
With your promise of forgiveness For the evils we lament:
When our tears have washed our faces Clean of anger, shame and fear,
You will kiss us with your beauty, Make our hearts and pathways clear.

In the Book of Numbers we come across the people of God wandering in the wilderness. They are not a happy people. Neither their hearts nor their paths are clear. The Book of Numbers picks up their story from the Exodus account of their bondage in Egypt and their liberation from slavery under the leadership of Moses Aaron and Miriam—but so often we read in it that they are far from happy with their freedom. Numbers especially concentrates on the generation that lives after those great events and is certainly not enjoying the forty long years in the wilderness before they can finally be led into the promised land. So the people of God find themselves in the desert. We too know that desert. We are free, but this desert life is hard. The journey is so long. Our bodies ache. We don't know what's going to happen next. The food is terrible, always the same things we've been cooking forever. We remember when we used to go out to eat. The

restaurants! The complicated delicious dishes we would never cook for ourselves! the fabulous cuisine of Egypt, mouthwatering aromatic dishes filled with onion and garlic and cumin. Doesn't it make all this manna this sourdough bread of the Coronavirus days, so dry and uninteresting, and always the same.

Of course, the manna the people of God were eating in their wilderness was is not sourdough bread, not ordinary food at all. Manna is the miracle food of God, sent by a loving creator into the barren wilderness to sustain us. When it appeared one morning like dew on the fields the people said "What the heck is this?" And that's what the Hebrew word Manna means-- What's this? To call this unexpected food of the desert "What's this" underlines the surprise, the mystery of the way God sustains us. But, like the Israelites, we would much rather have the ways our culture sustains us-- even if it's the slave culture of Egypt or the slaveholding racist culture of 400 years of US History—we would rather have those known things to feed on, the entertainments, the self-indulgent treats, the distractions. But God's manna, is something else again. What's that? It's unexpected, it is even (in contrast to the sweetmeats of the enslaved life) a little bitter, a little tough to chew. It doesn't stick around, you can't hoard it. But it is the food we need.

I always think this passage captures such a human moment here in the desert, all of us complaining about what we have been given, when what we have been given is an amazing miracle from God. Amazing grace has poured down on us, and we can only say, well, I would have rather had it at a different time, or in a different way, it's not quite right for me. We can be

so critical. If something doesn't match our expectations or our fantasies then it's no good. But maybe God's reality is much much better than our most self indulgent fantasy. We have to step back from all of that and see and celebrate how amazing, how powerful, how good is this real life we have been given, here as Christ's followers in this church in the wilderness of Maine, in this desert of the Coronavirus pandemic.

What is this? There's good in the pandemic? In God's grace, good can come out of even the most evil circumstance. In the pandemic we have learned that it is good to slow down. We have learned, or are learning, patience. We have learned we don't have to be close together to be very close together. We have found how to be community in new ways. We have learned technology. We have learned that being alone does not necessarily mean being lonely. We have also learned that being lonely is a true trauma that we need to find ways to heal, going forward.

What happens if we don't appreciate what God has given us? What happens if we don't like what our leaders are doing to try to keep us safe—because that's where we find them first in this passage, taking the long way around so they don't cross the Edomite territory. Because if there's one thing you want to avoid its an Edomite defending his home. So in order to keep the people safe, the government said they had to be patient and go the long way around. Keep wearing the mask. Keep washing the hands. Keep your distance. Because that will keep everyone safe. But there are always some who want to get to the promised land right now and don't want to go the long way round. If we're too much like that and don't appreciate what God has given us, in the careful rules and guidance of our leaders, if we are not

thankful for the miracles with which God feeds us and heals us and loves us day by day, if we ignore the bounty with which we are supplied, well, we will get what's coming to us. It's not God punishing us, because God does not condemn us. What's coming to us are the inevitable consequences of our actions and our attitude. And what is coming?

Snakes. Poisonous snakes. Snakes that bite. Many of us will die. Maybe as many as half a million, maybe more. Am I saying that things like the Covid19 pandemic are a punishment from God? No. **God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved**.

What happens is that the consequences of not living a grateful, thankful, humble life with God, leaves the people –leaves us-- open to attack by the serpents of the world. And the snakes are all around us. Turn on the tv and there they all are, all the serpents, and all the poisons they bring-- greed, self-aggrandizement, lying, violence, sexual abuse, drug abuse, hatred of strangers, injustice, inhumanity, shallow self-interest, betrayal of trust. Lots of snakes, much very powerful poison. Our community has been beset with such things. They have been biting us, people have died and are still dying. So the people, so we, must pray to the Lord-- take these snakes away, Lord.

And God shows us how to cope with the poison. Moses makes an icon, a bronze snake, a picture of the evil that has overtaken the people, so they can look at it full on. That's what we need from our leaders: the courage to help us look at the reality of what has bitten us. I call this sermon, by the way, The Snake on a Stick. The snake on or off a stick is a powerful archetypal symbol of healing, found in many cultures in the West and the East. It is

both an emblem of something dangerous, something we fear, something evil, and at the same time, the rescue from the danger and the turning of fear into hope and the evil into the good cure.

When we in the desert look at that bronze serpent Moses lifts high on a pole, we have to look at ourselves, at the evil we have let into our lives, at the way we have worshiped the poison instead of being grateful for the gifts of God. In order to be saved from our sin we have to be able to look at it fully. So yes, the snake on a stick is a kind of vaccination. You have a good look at what has poisoned our world, you get a little jab of the evil, and you can then find the strength to resist it, to overcome it and be free from it. God lead us all to such a vaccination.

And Just as Moses held the serpent aloft in the wilderness, St John the Divine says, so must the son of man be lifted on the cross. Jesus on a stick. This is the vaccination theory of the cross, one the theologians haven't yet considered. Humanity takes the evil on in one dose with all the violence of our need to sacrifice taken in by one frail body, and the rest of us get strength to resist the diseases of greed, despair, violence and hate. We get to be healthy and live in love.

John 3:16 is such a famous passage. If you can remember baseball, perhaps you remember the signs some fans used to wave around behind home plate "John 3:16" I suppose it was well meant evangelism but it speaks of a very shallow reading of the profound message of the gospel. Those waving the sign meant you'd better believe in Jesus or you'll go to Hell. As if that could convince anyone that our God is a God of love. But they forget this bit: **God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in**

order that the world might be saved. But for the sign wavers this is a message about salvation as a personal, an individual thing. Well of course it is meant personally, each one of us has a call, each one of us must answer to God in the end, but salvation isn't an individual thing. You can't be saved alone.

Either we are saved together you and me and all creation or we are lost forever. If I am saved and you are not, am I really saved? Not if love is real. No. We're in this together.

I am leaning on the scholarship of Mark Davis here as he points out how wrong it is to isolate the individual's personal fate from the context of community. In this story in Numbers, no individual is named as the culprit; it is about the community's collective complaints, shared horror, and communal redemption. It is also surely wrong to reduce 'life here and now' to a simple testing ground for 'life then and there.' Life here and now is filled with God's gracious provision.

If we can interpret Christ on the cross through the story of the curing of snake bite by the elevation of the bronze serpent by Moses, then God has provided Jesus for our health and our salvation and our vaccination against evil. We can acknowledge this gift, or continue to look for something else more attuned with our present culture. Of course the cross, is not merely a device for elevating something so that all can gather around and see. It is an instrument for inflicting torture, in order to overcome our enemies through violence. That is the sin we must gather to see, to look square in the eyes, and with which we must reckon.

The elevation of Jesus on the cross confronts us with our own rejection of God's gracious provision, our stubborn refusal to accept God's way, and the radical, communal reckoning that leads to the fullness of life. (Mark Davis)

Let us in these desert days of Lent and of the coronavirus keep looking to Jesus. He will give us all we need. By his wounds we are healed. By his love we are set free. By his death, we learn to give up everything so we can be raised with him into joy. Joy, people Joy.

Joy to all who in this season

Come to celebrate God's love
All who hope to find new treasure
In the dwelling of the dove.

Have a happy Lent!