Holy God, by the power of your Holy Spirit, illuminate our darkened world that we may turn our focus on you and live faithfully in the light of Christ. Amen

In my career as a surgical nurse I have been privileged to witness some pretty amazing medical interventions. There has been such an incredible evolution of technology and technique in the time from the late 1970’s to the 2000’s, and the advances continue on a daily basis. For example, when I started out, there was little use of telescopes to see inside the body. By the time I left the Operating Room we were doing so many surgeries though the use of scopes that incisions had become much smaller, recovery times were lessened and pain following surgery has been significantly reduced for many people. We certainly have come a long way!

And I have also seen some very strange and unexpected things. I will never forget the day that a surgeon made a request for me to order leeches. Yes, you heard me correctly – blood sucking leeches; the same ones that as kids, we poured salt on to detach them from our skin after swimming in the lake! I thought, “Is it April Fools Day?” But he was serious. You see, one of the ways leeches can be used is to help bring circulation to areas of the body that have trouble getting oxygen and nutrients to the skin after a graft. And it can work! Still, it is strange medicine indeed, and frankly a little creepy!

That’s kind of the way I feel about the story in Numbers today. Moses and the Israelites are still wandering in the wilderness after leaving Mount Hor. It was there that Aaron became ill and died. The wandering people have just completed a thirty-day mourning for one of their leaders. And it wasn’t long before that time that Moses sister Miriam was buried in Kadesh. They have been out there in the wild for a while; nearly 40 years! They have been denied passage in lands that would make their journey less arduous and it seems there have been more losses than gains. Many in their number have just about given up on the dream of freedom as God’s chosen and the new generation doesn’t even remember captivity and slavery.

They are realizing that freedom ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. Freedom is big, uncharted territory, and it’s full of uncertainty and hard decisions. Gratitude fatigue has set in and the people lapse into distrust and complaining, or what is known as *the murmurings* of the Israelites. They’ve been faced with stinky water, no water, the same food day in and day out. Where the complaints in the past have been mostly whining and grumbling to Moses and Aaron, this time their frustration comes pouring out, and “the people spoke against God and Moses.”

“Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” they ask. “For there is no food and water, *and we detest this miserable food*.” (That food we just said we don’t have) One of the sources I read this week called it the “Let’s Go Back to Egypt Committee”.

Scripture tells us that God sent serpents to plague the people and many died from their bites of poison. Not exactly the response they, or we, would have expected. Kind of like that old parental warning of giving us something to cry about! Recognizing their sin the people plead with Moses to pray for them. I imagine the people expected more of what has happened in the past. The miraculous mercy of God will appear; manna will come down from the sky, water will spring from a rock and snakes will disappear.

But God is a mysterious physician who brings to them even stranger medicine. Moses is commanded to fashion the likeness of a serpent in bronze and place it upon his staff. All who gaze upon the snake wound around the staff are cured of the poison within them. Simple right?

But, if we are paying attention, we might notice that the snakes remain among the people and they continue to strike them with their poisonous fangs. Those who are bitten are challenged to focus upon a representation of the very instrument of their torture, to look their sin directly in the eyes as it is lifted up before them. This is the medicine that they are presented as the cure for their dis-ease of distrust. It is a stark reminder that God’s ways are not our ways.

The language of self-examination is not absent in our culture. There are many traditions in our world, religious and secular, that embrace self-reflection and uncovering; the daily practice of the Ignatian Examen and the Personal Inventory so vital in recovery from addiction are just two of them. It is often difficult and necessary work that we are called to do. Seeking to uncover truth can be painful and may leave us raw with emotion. Wanting to turn back is a natural human response. We may throw up our hands and cry, “It’s too much God, I can’t go through with it!”

I think it’s a trap when we think of the practice of looking at our selves as “self-examination”, as if it is something we do entirely in isolation, without assistance or counsel from God and others. In fact, the Israelites eventually forget the saving power of God that the bronze serpent represents and begin to worship the symbol itself, mistaking the cure for the source of renewal and restoration. As the Book of Wisdom reminds us, *“we are saved, not by the thing that was beheld, but by you, Savior of all.”* (Wisdom 16:7)

Jesus tells the Pharisee Nicodemus, *“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.”* Nicodemus has come to see Jesus, sneaking, dare we say, *slithering* about in the darkness of night, for fear of being seen with the controversial teacher and truth-teller that has drawn the ire and suspicion of his fellow religious leaders.

Poor Nicodemus, don’t you know that we are only as sick as our secrets and fears. God’s remedy, as we wander in the wilderness, is both the agent of our death and of our healing. God does not choose to remove the perils and hazards of the present, but in turn, God became incarnate in Jesus Christ to bring us to new life, to walk with us in the snaky places, and lift us to the place where fear becomes courage, wounded-ness becomes healing, and sin becomes forgiveness. Having authentic life involves our walking out into the light and lifting our eyes to Christ.

In Barbara Brown Taylor’s book, *Speaking of Sin*, she describes a conversation about bad choices and consequences that she has with a friend as they embark on a lengthy interstate drive. “*In this life*”, her friend says, “*it’s possible to get away with stuff we do for a long time. We can hide it or lie about it and the fallout may take years to catch up with us. But the reality is, that in God’s life, everything is present and revealed. When you make a choice, there is absolutely no delay in in feeling the consequences of it.*”

Taylor replies, *“You make it sound as if hell is a function of getting closer to God instead of further away.”* To which her friend answers, *“Well maybe it is. Maybe it’s God’s grace to let us feel hell so acutely that we decide we don’t want to live there anymore.”*

As we come to the halfway point in our Lenten journey, we might ask our selves what does God’s strange medicine offer to us? Is there a place of brokenness or longing you are living with that might be inviting you to bring your eyes to rest upon it for a time, raise it up to Jesus, and find it healed?

Today Paul reminds us of God’s richness in mercy, of God’s great love that exists even as we were dead in our sin, a love that makes us alive again in Christ. In that love and grace we are moved from mere snake worship into the sacrament of healing and reconciliation. God has made us for freedom, to live and move in the light of Christ, who came not to condemn the world, but to save it.

Amen.