

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles**

**Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 11, 2018**

**Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister**

**John 3:14-21**

**FOR REFLECTION**

**“Certain though I am - and ever more certain - that I must press on in life as though Christ awaited me at the term of the universe, at the same time I feel no special assurance of the existence of Christ. Believing is not seeing. As much as anyone, I imagine, I walk in the shadows of faith.”**

~ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, French Philosopher (1881-1955)

**“It was once said that the moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped.”**

~ Hubert H. Humphrey, American Politician (1911-1978)

**Serpents in the Shadows**

You may remember from several Lents ago that I reflected on various symbols of covenant: circumcision, rainbow, the commandments, etc. This text and the symbol of the serpent or snake was discussed – the snake being, among other things, the “Caduceus” - the traditional symbol of Hermes which features two snakes winding around an often-winged staff. It is often **mistakenly** used as a symbol of medicine...

I was convinced that this was not a mistake – because of this story out of chapter 21 of the Book of Numbers. The Hebrews who had escaped Egypt were in the wilderness complaining against G-d. G-d sent poisonous snakes to bite them – then told Moses to make a bronze snake, hold it up on a pole – so that those who looked at it would be healed of the poison. So, the idea of one snake leading to death, the other to wholeness was appealing as a symbol for the medical field.

But I have discovered since then that I was mistaken. The true symbol is the Rod of Asclepius , a single snake entwined with a staff – associated with the Greek god Asclepius, the deity associated with healing and medicine. The “Caduceus” is associated with the Hermes, the emissary and messenger of the gods. Hermes was also "the divine trickster" and "the god of boundaries and the transgression of boundaries..."

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermes>

It is relatively common, especially in the United States, to find the Caduceus, with its two snakes and wings, used as a symbol of medicine instead of the Rod of Asclepius, with only a single snake. This usage was popularized largely as a

result of the adoption of the Caduceus as its insignia by the U.S. Army Medical Corps in 1902 at the insistence of a single officer...

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rod\\_of\\_Asclepius#Confusion\\_with\\_the\\_Caduceus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rod_of_Asclepius#Confusion_with_the_Caduceus)

It is interesting to note that a majority of **professional** healthcare associations in the U.S. use the correct Rod of Asclepius – the single snake. It is likely that most educated health professionals are aware of the correct interpretation of the symbol.

The majority of **commercial** healthcare organizations use the Caduceus – two intertwined snakes.

This has led to some fun, snarky commentaries about the misuse of Hermes Rod as a medical symbol by those SELLING medicine – like this one from The Scientific Monthly in 1932:

“As god of the high-road and the market-place Hermes was perhaps above all else the patron of commerce and the fat purse: as a corollary, he was the special protector of the traveling salesman. As spokesman for the gods, he not only brought peace on earth (occasionally even the peace of death), but his silver-tongued eloquence could always make the worse appear the better cause. From this latter point of view, would not his symbol be suitable for certain Congressmen, all medical quacks, book agents and purveyors of vacuum cleaners, rather than for the straight-thinking, straight-speaking therapist? As conductor of the dead to their subterranean abode, his emblem would seem more appropriate on a hearse than on a physician's car.”

— Stuart L. Tyson, "The Caduceus", in The Scientific Monthly 1932  
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So, all snark aside, Moses held up one snake – the healing Rod of Asclepius – in John's gospel and imagination as a symbol of Jesus the Christ – healer and rescuer of the world. And the lifting up or “elevation” of that snake represents both the crucifixion and the glorification of that medicinal Christ.

This anonymous gospel, written late in the first century – independent from other “synoptic” gospels of the time – is an example of doing theology in hostile times. Jewish people who believed Jesus was the Messiah were being evicted from synagogues by the orthodox leadership – a likely scenario for the audience this was written for. Later given the authorship of John, it is a text dedicated to convincing Jewish Christians to continue to believe in the divinity of Jesus, no matter what happens to them.

The blatant condemnation of people who don't believe in Christ's divinity is a reaction to perceived persecution. Moses lifts the ONE snake, Christ. The two-faced leadership of the synagogues live with TWO snakes in the shadows, with the tricksters and death

dealers. This theology which loses much in translation is a theology of the victims – aimed at the perpetrators.

I've printed an annotated version at the end of the bulletin – with notes from the Westar Scholars Version. In early Hebrew there is no punctuation – so things like quotation marks are modern additions. The lack of quotations marks blurs the lines regarding whether John is supposedly quoting Jesus – or preaching a message of his own. Scholars believe that all of this particular text is actually the writer doing theology.

This doesn't necessarily make this text irrelevant or less meaningful. It continues at the heart of much of modern Christian theology – for better or for worse. And it behooves us to understand it in our own context as well as the original.

For instance – even today – there are Pentecostal ministers in places like Appalachia that handle poisonous snakes in worship as a form of prayer. The snakes, representing chaos and death – but faith in Christ keeps the handler safe and heals all wounds. It is this kind of literalistic Christian faith – the idea that the Snake/Christ can both destroy and cleanse – that led to the belief that our current president is capable of destroying the tumors of government and then cleansing our political system. "Draining the Swamp" would be another metaphor for such a thing.

The belief that:

18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil...

In other words, those who don't believe in Jesus are evildoers. This was written by a Jewish Christian as a criticism of Orthodox Jews. And it is now being used to condemn anything and anyone who is not an evangelical Christian – especially Muslims.

Such archaic ideas and beliefs have been allowed to crawl out of the shadows and into the daylight. They are a vision, a nightmare to behold.

But this is not just the territory of religious extremists on the right. In an article about "The Battle Hymn of the Republic", rallying cry for the northern troops in the American Civil War, it is pointed out that any side of a conflict can believe that G-d is on their side:

For 150 years, Americans have seen military campaigns as a righteous quest to smite tyrants and spread freedom. The "Battle Hymn" is our way of war; the "Battle Hymn" is how we fight.

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord*

In the "Battle Hymn," there is no separation of church and state. The United States is a divine vessel propelled on the rough seas by the breath of God. Indeed, the nation's wars have often been imbued with providential fire. Americans on both sides of the Civil War came to see the struggle as a holy war, with Christ and his armies arrayed against the Beast. One Pennsylvanian soldier wrote: "every day I have a more religious feeling, that this war is a crusade for the good of mankind."

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2010/11/the-battle-hymn-of-the-republic-americas-song-of-itself/66070/>

Christian self-righteousness and calls to battle are embedded in every era – along with other self-righteous and vengeful “holy” human movements.

The victims of violence and oppression have historically become perpetrators of the same against others – in a cycle that defies logic but is deeply human.

The Israeli-Palestinian situation is a case in point.

The Rwandan Civil War and genocide, a conflict between Tutsis and Hutus after the revolt against colonial rule, would be another.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rwandan\\_genocide](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rwandan_genocide)

Out of this mindset comes the Christian claim of a “war on Christmas” – and the idea that civil rights for others is an attack on their religious freedom.

It behooves us to look at ourselves, in this season of self-reflection, to search in the shadows of our own souls for the poisonous serpents that live in here. Do we feel victimized by events and people in our lives? If so, what is our emotional response? A healthy desire for justice and reparations – or, perhaps, a desire for revenge that hurts them as much as we’ve been hurt?

The casualties in the shadows are mercy and forgiveness, renewed health and restoration of relationships. The greatness of the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa was its effectiveness in circumventing much of this deadly cycle – bringing evils into the light rather than encouraging victims to enter the shadows for revenge.

There is much to be explored here – in my own heart, let alone the heart of the world.

May this troubled 2000 year-old text work on us, enlighten us, send piercing spotlights into the shadows within and around us –

so that we can disentangle ourselves from the serpents of the past and present – standing tall and merciful in this old and wounded world.

## John 3:14-21

14 And just as Moses [*elevated*] lifted up the [*snake*] serpent in the wilderness, so must the [*“The Human One”*] Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but [*to rescue the world*] in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil [*weren't they?*]. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds [*belong to God*] have been done in God. "

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*Modern punctuation inserts quotation marks.*

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In Greek mythology, the Rod of Asclepius (Greek: Ράβδος του Ασκληπιού *Rávdos tou Asklipiού*; Unicode symbol: ☱), also known as the Staff of Asclepius (sometimes also spelled Asklepios or Aesculapius) and as the asklepian, is a serpent-entwined rod wielded by the Greek god Asclepius, a deity associated with healing and medicine. The symbol has continued to be used in modern times, where it is associated with medicine and health care, yet frequently confused with the staff of the god Hermes, the Caduceus.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rod\\_of\\_Asclepius](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rod_of_Asclepius)

Confusion with the Caduceus

Main article: Caduceus as a symbol of medicine

The US Army Medical Corps Branch Plaque. The adoption, in 1902, of the Caduceus for US Army medical officer uniforms popularized the use of the symbol throughout the medical field in the United States.

It is relatively common, especially in the United States, to find the Caduceus, with its two snakes and wings, used as a symbol of medicine instead of the Rod of Asclepius, with only a single snake. This usage was popularised largely as a result of the adoption of the Caduceus as its insignia by the U.S. Army Medical Corps in 1902 at the insistence of a single officer (though there are conflicting claims as to whether this was Capt. Frederick P. Reynolds or Col. John R. van Hoff).

The Rod of Asclepius is the dominant symbol for professional healthcare associations in the United States. One survey found that 62% of professional healthcare associations used the rod of Asclepius as their symbol. The same survey found that 76% of commercial healthcare organizations used the Caduceus symbol. The author of the study suggests the difference exists because professional associations are more likely to have a real understanding of the two symbols, whereas commercial organizations are more likely to be concerned with the visual impact a symbol will have in selling their products.

The long-standing and abundantly attested historical associations of the Caduceus with commerce are considered by many to be inappropriate in a symbol used by those engaged in the healing arts. This has occasioned significant criticism of the use of the Caduceus in a medical context.

“As god of the high-road and the market-place Hermes was perhaps above all else the patron of commerce and the fat purse: as a corollary, he was the special protector of the traveling salesman. As spokesman for the gods, he not only brought peace on earth (occasionally even the peace of death), but his silver-tongued eloquence could always make the worse appear the better cause. From this latter point of view, would not his symbol be suitable for certain Congressmen, all medical quacks, book agents and purveyors of vacuum cleaners, rather than for the straight-thinking, straight-speaking therapist? As conductor of the dead to their subterranean abode, his emblem would seem more appropriate on a hearse than on a physician’s car.”

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