

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

March 14, 2021 – LENT 4, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*The Best Medicine*”

Numbers 21:4-9 (The Israelites began to doubt and question God, but He forgave and healed them)  
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 (Thanksgiving for the Lord’s mercy and goodness)  
Ephesians 2:1-10 (We have been saved by faith, through grace, that we might do good works for Christ)  
St. John 3:14-21 (Jesus was sent by God to save the world, and give eternal life to all who believe)

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I don’t know about you, but I am not fond of snakes. I don’t want to visit them at the zoo, or handle them. And I really don’t want them in my house! Where we lived in Maryland—near a creek—snakes would get into our basement by God-only-knows-what means. Fortunately, we had a calm, smart cat who, when confronting a snake, turned into a ferocious warrior and actually killed one of those serpents when it threatened her kittens. Another time, only the shed skin of a terrified slitherer remained on the laundry room floor.

But in today’s Old Testament lesson, we hear about God using a poisonous snake to *heal* repentant sinners and allow them to *live*. This seems like a really weird story to us, but it wasn’t so strange to the ancient world. Think, for a moment, about a frequently-seen symbol of medicine and the healing arts: A snake entwined on a rod—just as Moses’ was—except it’s topped by wings. It’s called the Rod of Asclepius, named after the Greek demigod of medicine and healing.

This symbol sometimes appears at hospitals and doctor’s offices; it is at the center of the World Health Organization’s flag; and can be seen on some ambulances’ and emergency services’ logos.<sup>1</sup> Many centuries ago, snakes were thought to have healing powers, and non-poisonous ones were sometimes used to treat the sick. The fact that the snake sheds its skin (as we saw when our kitty went on the rampage) was associated with rebirth and resurrection.

And so we come to today’s Gospel reading, in which Jesus makes use of this ancient symbolism as He declares: “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” (Jn. 3:14). Our Lord was comparing His being lifted high upon the Cross to Moses lifting up that healing serpent, because through both miracles God granted forgiveness and life.

The difference is that in the Sinai desert where the Israelites wandered for 40 years, the forgiveness and preservation of life which they received were only *temporary*. What Jesus offers us through His sacrificial, atoning death on the Cross is *permanent* forgiveness of our sins and *eternal* life with Him in heaven.

Today, the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, is called “Laetare Sunday,” from the Latin word for “rejoice.” The Church gives us this day amidst the solemnity of Lent, in which to show forth the joy in our hearts as we anticipate the celebration of Christ’s Resurrection at Easter. Notice the cheerier rose color that is allowed on this day.

We are also permitted to engage in a certain amount of humor and silliness. It’s been said that laughter is the best medicine, and I much prefer giggling to snakes. Humor that is clean and fun is part of any full life. Not only does it make us feel good to laugh, but also, it makes others feel good. And it releases endorphins, the same body chemistry that boosts feelings of intimacy and romance. I guess that explains how shared laughter helped bring me and Rick together, 28 years ago.

Many centuries ago, King Solomon wrote: “A merry heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones” (Prov. 17:22) and, “the cheerful heart has a continual feast” (Prov. 15:15b). It turns out, science supports this notion. According to a recent article by the Integrative Medicine Center of Western Colorado, “Happy people tend to live longer and experience better health than their unhappy peers [so found] a review of more than 160 studies of human and animal studies.

The lead author, University of Illinois professor emeritus of psychology Ed Diener summarized ‘the general conclusion from each type of study is that your subjective well-being—that is, feeling positive about your life, not stressed out, not depressed—contributes to both longevity and better health among healthy populations.’”<sup>2</sup>

That’s great news. But we can’t always be happy, and with given what our nation and the world are experiencing these days, it’s even more challenging to be cheerful.

Scientists may have realized that laughter is the best medicine, but laughter—as great as it is—fades away. It, too, is temporary. What will cheer our hearts and bring the greatest joy to our souls is the core verse of this morning’s Gospel, John 3:16: “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.*”

A child once tried to quote the King James Version of John 3:16, “His only begotten Son,” but the little kid misquoted it and said, “His only *forgotten* Son.” It was a slip of the tongue that carried more truth than we would care to admit. Because, sadly, for far too many people in today’s world, Jesus Christ *is* forgotten. His life, His love, and His sacrifice for them is either forgotten, or utterly unknown.<sup>3</sup>

That is why our lives are meant to be lights illuminating the path to God’s only begotten Son, as we witness to His forgiving love which makes it possible for all who believe to have eternal life. St. Paul writes, “Faith, hope and love ... the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13). And because God, out of His immense and unconditional *love* sent Jesus to save us, He calls us to be a people of love, of reconciliation, and of forgiveness. And if we pray for the grace to be such people, God *will* equip and enable us to live that way.

I’d like to close with a story shared by another Episcopal priest, Fr. Jeffry Smead: Years ago, a young man had quarreled very badly with his father and left home. He continued to keep in touch with his mother. Then, after some time, he longed to return home for Christmas, but was afraid his father wouldn’t allow it. His mother wrote to him, urging him to come home. But he did not feel he could, until he was sure his father had forgiven him. His mom wrote back that she would talk with his dad. And, if he had forgiven his son, she would tie a white cloth on the tree that grew along the railroad tracks near their home. If there was no white cloth, it would be better for him to continue on.

So the young man took a train bound for home. As it drew near the town, he was so nervous he said to a friend who was traveling with him, “I can’t bear to look. Trade seats with me and look out the window. I’ll describe the tree, and you tell me whether there’s a white cloth on it.” The friend changed places with him and looked out the window. After a few moments, he said, “Oh yes, I see the tree.” Anxiously, the young man asked, “Is there a white cloth tied to it?” His friend said nothing. Then he turned, and in a very gentle voice murmured, “There’s a white cloth tied to every branch!”<sup>4</sup>

Dear Friends, in a sense, Jesus is the white cloth our heavenly Father tied to the tree. That tree that became the Cross of Calvary ... signaling that it is safe for us to come home. And *that* is the source of our true joy—even to the point of holy hilarity—that will bring us healing and wholeness.

**Let us pray:** Gracious God, we are so thankful for Your love toward us. So often Lord, we can’t believe that anyone loves us; we feel our mistakes so strongly; we feel rejected and inadequate; we are lonely, angry, and afraid. Thank You for Your boundless love, a love stronger than death, which reaches out to every one of us. Help us to trust in Your mercy, Your grace, and Your care, that we might respond in confidence and in joy, helping to lighten the burdens of others, bringing a smile to their faces and delight to their hearts. In Jesus precious’ Name we pray.<sup>5</sup> Amen!

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. “Rod of Asclepius,” [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rod_of_Asclepius), 1 March 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rod\_of\_Asclepius> 3 March 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Adapt. Scott Rollins, “A Joyful Heart is Good Medicine,” [IMC](https://imcwc.com/html5-blank/a-joyful-heart-is-good-medicine/), n.d., <https://imcwc.com/html5-blank/a-joyful-heart-is-good-medicine/> 3 March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Adapt. J. Jeffrey Smead, “The Ledger,” [SermonCentral](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-ledger-j-jeffrey-smead-sermon-on-world-192118), 10 March 2015, <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-ledger-j-jeffrey-smead-sermon-on-world-192118> 3 March 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Adapt. Smead, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Adapt. Richard J. Fairchild, “The Medicine of Eternity,” [Sermons & Sermon-Lectionary Resources](http://www.spirit-net.ca/sermons/b-le04sm.php) © 2002-2006, <http://www.spirit-net.ca/sermons/b-le04sm.php> 3 March 2021.