



A Reflection on the Fourth Week of Lent
by Sr. Juliana Casey, IHM, Ph.D.

The Sign of the Serpent

It's hard to be patient in a desert. It's hard to be faithful to a covenant when you're hungry and thirsty and want to go back to what was familiar. Just ask the people of Israel. Even though they have been chosen, freed, cared for and saved, they want proof of that every day in the form of good water, good food and a clear map. Not just water, good water; not just food, tasty food; not just promises, results.

The complaining gets to God. Serpents appear in the desert and cause the death of many. Terrified, the people repent. They go to Moses and ask him to intercede for them. Moses does, and is told to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. Everyone who looks upon the serpent will be healed. The sign of death has become the sign of life.

Jesus will soon become an even greater sign of even fuller life. To look upon him and believe is to have life. In place of a bronze image of a serpent, we find Jesus. Lifted up on a cross, he is the one who will save the world. There is only one condition: to believe that in the absurdity and the shame of death by crucifixion, love conquers and life is given.

In this, the fourth week of Lent, we learn the reason for Jesus' journey. It's quite simple, really. God loves what God has created—all of it. God is relentless in pursuing the salvation of creation—all of it, all of us. One time it's a rainbow in the sky. Another time it's a promise of heirs. Another time it's a covenant and law. Still another time, it's the image of a serpent that will save a people who have done nothing but complain.

Finally, it is a son. That which is dearest to the heart of God, the Father's very Son, is given to the world to save it.

Lent is the time when we make this journey along with the Israelites in their desert, along with Jesus in his desert and his ministry. Lent is the time when we recall the love of God for us. It is not so much a time of "giving up" as it is a time of receiving. Lent is not a time of the head, or the will. It is instead, a time of the heart.

What is required of us during Lent is to turn toward the light in our lives, to see there the love of God and to welcome that love into our days, our work, our



Lenten Reflections

hearts. The only condition is that we believe. To believe is not an intellectual assent to some facts or hypotheses; it is to look to the evidence of God's goodness and to trust that goodness will continue in our lives. To believe is, ultimately, to open our hearts to the news that, no matter what, we are loved and carried in a mercy and kindness that is beyond our comprehension.

The Catholic health care ministry is, at its core, an act of belief. It began in a movement of the Spirit, in the hearts of holy women and men who had themselves experienced God's mercy and kindness. These men and women were moved to give that compassion and care to others. Our ministry does not depend upon the goodness, the worthiness of those who need us. It depends on our willingness to give what has been given to us: care, compassion and life.

Lent is long. Lent can be tedious. But, Lent is a gift. It reminds us as Paul said in his letter to the Ephesians that "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which God loved us, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved." (Eph 2:4)

May those we serve know this through our care for them.

The Catholic Health Association would like to thank Jon Sarta for allowing us to use his music from the albums "The Catholic Music Project Volume V: Lent," and "The Catholic Music Project Volume VI: Easter" for the podcast version of this reflection. His music can be obtained from mljmusic.com.