

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

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Lectionary 638:

Num 21:4b-9

Ps 78:1bc-2, 34-35, 36-37, 38

Phil 2:6-11

John 3:13-17

Possible preaching themes:

- Jesus took on what could be considered the “venom” of our sins and by his sacrifice created the “antivenom” for our salvation through the instrument of the cross.
- The paradox of the cross is one of the most baffling paradoxes in human history. However, paradoxes are catalysts for arriving at new insights and it is the paradox of the cross that gives us both a deeper knowledge of and personal experience of God.

Possible scientific resources:

- **On venomous bites and antivenoms:** Snake bite venom is a complex chemical mixture that is difficult to treat by synthetic methods and current treatments utilize harvested antibodies from inoculated large mammals (like horses) to treat patients. ○ [This technical article](#) provides information on the global concerns with snakebites and a brief summary of current antivenom treatment:
 - [This very accessible article](#) highlights a novel treatment and its significance for general antivenom therapies:
 - In this [9-minute Ted-Talk video](#) Harvard Professor Mandē Holford examines both the power of venom and its potential for saving your life .
- **On paradoxes:** Paradoxes are important tools for helping us think in new ways and play a critical role in the development of knowledge. ○ [This 3-minute video](#) describes the nature of a paradox and how it is used in literature to help us question our habitual ways of thinking.
 - The philosopher [Wolfgang Stegemann](#) reflects on paradoxes in various scientific fields and how they have had major impacts on the development of knowledge.
 - This [accessible article by a Professor of Management](#) illustrates how she and others employ the tension of paradox to find lasting solutions.

Homily outline: Christ and the Cross, the antivenom for our sins

First Reading: Saraph Serpents

- In the first reading, we heard the story of how the Israelites suffered greatly from the bites of saraph serpents which were brought into their midst because of their sin against God and Moses.

- After crying out to Moses, who interceded on their behalf, God administered the cure for their affliction by commanding Moses to build a bronze image of the serpent which he mounted on a pole.
- This is a remarkable story because it reveals God's mercy—not just by rescuing us from affliction, but also by working directly through the very source of our affliction.
- Notice that all who looked at the image of the serpent, the very creature which was the source of their affliction, were cured.
 - The image of the snake became the cure for the snakebite.
- How fortunate then, that this reading is placed in juxtaposition with today's Gospel, providing some strong analogies about how God cured us of our sin by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

Snakebites Now

- Snakebites are still a major issue in many countries:
 - In [sub-Saharan Africa alone](#), it is estimated that there are more than 300,000 snakebites which lead to over 7,000 deaths and 10,000 amputations annually
- To this day, there is little treatment that can be done for snakebites:
 - For less venomous bites, it is possible to tend the wound to prevent infection and hope the body can ride out the onslaught of sickness until the poison works its way through their system.
 - For more venomous bites, the chances of death or amputation become alarmingly high.
- There is currently only one kind of treatment that can effectively cure snakebites, antivenom therapy:
 - Snake venom is a [highly complex chemical mixture](#), making synthetic methods of developing antivenoms extremely challenging
 - [Current antivenom therapies](#) work by inoculating large animals such as horses with small amounts of the target venom until they become hyperimmunized to it, then the antibodies they produce are extracted from their blood plasma and given to infected patients
 - Unfortunately, this highly specific method usually only works for one species of snake and can have varying efficacies that are even dependent on the particular snake.
 - A [new method of antivenom therapy](#) utilizes genetic engineering of nanobodies from alpacas and llamas immunized by multiple kinds of snakebites to demonstrate potential for a more general antivenom treatment for snakebites.
- Analogously, antivenom therapies work like the bronze image of the saraph in today's first reading as the source of the affliction becomes the avenue for the cure.

Christ and the Cross

- Today we celebrate the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, a liturgical moment that exults in Christ's victory over sin and death, which metaphorically mirrors yet surpasses the marvels of antivenom therapies.
- Jesus became a human being and, in his incarnation, exposed himself to the venom of sin.

- Refusing to be bitten by sin, yet taking on the most venomous effect of sin (death) Jesus in his self-sacrificing humanity provided the antivenom to sin for all of humanity.
- This ultimate act of mercy is eternally announced by the cross.
- And so today, we exalt the holy cross because this instrument of death and symbol of destruction became an instrument of life and symbol of redemption.
- By his sacrifice on the cross, Jesus revealed that our restoration and redemption from sin is possible and freely available to us in his gift of self-less love if we choose to practice his selflessness.
- In every Eucharist Jesus invites us to follow his example and participate in his redemptive sacrifice not only by taking on our own crosses but choosing to be generous and selfless even in our suffering.
- In the words of [Saint Teresa of Calcutta](#): "Love has no meaning unless it is marked by sacrifice. We cannot truly love unless we give until it hurts, for love that does not cost anything is not real love, nor is it beautiful."

Tags: chemistry, cross, mercy, sacrifice, venom