May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

You don’t have to travel to Australia or India to bump into venomous snakes. We have 12 kind of snakes and four species of them are very dangerous here in Canada! You even can notice some signs on the roads near Mississauga, Ontario saying “Beware of snakes”. We are told to avoid the snakes and if you see one get away, because they are dangerous beings and they can bite you, hurt you, maybe even kill you.

It’s not just about the snakes that crawl on the ground. We avoid those things we fear, the things that hurt us, that bite us and cause pain – not just physically but also emotionally and spiritually.

So we avoid dealing with our addictions and attachments. We ignore broken relationships. We put off doing the hard work of life. We turn away from our difficulties. We repress painful memories. We don’t acknowledge our fear or anger. We refuse to think or talk about our own death. We deny the things we have done and left undone. After all isn’t that what the sign says? If you see a snake get away.

What if there was a different sign? What if the sign said, “If you see a snake look him straight in the eyes. Stare him down. See who blinks first.” It sounds kind of crazy but at some level that’s exactly what God told the Israelites to do.

Their impatience in the wilderness, their fear of dying, living with an uncertain future and an unknown destination, the emptiness, thirst and hunger, the difficulty of life – all manifested themselves as snakes in the wilderness; snakes that would bite, wound, and kill them. They would have to face the reality of their snakes.

It seems like a smart Israelite would turn and run. But when the Israelites tried that they died. We are not saved from our snakes by running away. God offers a different option. Instead of turning away, the salvation God offered the Israelites was that they were to stare at the very thing they feared. God’s ways are not our ways and God’s thoughts are not our thoughts. God’s logic often seems foolishness.

Somehow authentic life involves facing and looking at the reality of death – not only our own physical death but also the many ways we die each day. The daily deaths happen in various ways – in our disappointments, failures, and shattered dreams; in our regrets and sorrows; our loneliness; our anger, fear, and resentment; the losses and broken relationships we experience; the separation and isolation caused by sin.

God’s remedy reveals that the wilderness serpent is both the agent of death and the agent of healing. The cross of death is now the cross of life. God says, “Look at it. Look at the very thing you fear, the thing that bites, terrorizes, and kills you.” Those are the places in which Jesus Christ stands victorious. God does not remove the dangers and difficulties of life. Instead, God offers a remedy and a way forward. “*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up*.”

In the person of Jesus, God became flesh to stand with us in the snaky places, to heal us, to make us alive, and lift us to the heavenly places. In Christ:

* The place of fear becomes the place of courage.
* The place of sin becomes the place of forgiveness.
* The place of wounding becomes the place of healing.
* The place of death becomes the place of life.
* The place of falling down becomes the place of rising up

Those who are willing to look into the snaky places of their life will see the Son of Man being lifted up; the healing and transformation of this world and life. Christ says to each one of us, “Look on me, believe on me, and live. Turn your gaze and you will be saved by the God who sent me. I have not come to condemn the world but to love the world into salvation.”

This holy season of Lent asks us to discover and name the snakes of our life. And then decide. Will we turn and run or will we turn and gaze? Are we lifting our eyes to meet the gaze of love, the gaze of Christ? Amen.