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Isaiah 43:1b–3, ESV

*“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.*

*² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.*

*³ For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*

Acts 27:39–28:6, abbreviated, ESV

³⁹ Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned if possible to run the ship ashore. ⁴⁰ So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders. Then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach. ⁴¹ But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf. The centurion ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, ⁴⁴ and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

***28** After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. ² The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. ³ When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. ⁴ When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, “No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live.” ⁵ He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. ⁶ They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.*

Psalm 133:1-3, abbreviated, NIV

¹ *How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!*

² *It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.*

³ *It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the LORD bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore.*

Snakebit.

We looked at our first passage in the past, and today, I'd like to look at it again, but from a different perspective. Isaiah is speaking for God. The people of God had wandered away, but they have regained their faith, have stopped living corrupt lives, and God has, of course forgiven. Isaiah is reassuring the people of God that because of their faith, they will be protected by God. Through Isaiah, God says this to the Israelites:

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.*

When you walk through fire you shall not be burned. Notice that it does not say "You will **never** walk through fire." This is very important, and it tells us what happens when faith meets the real world. The popular pseudo-Christian teaching

that faith in God will relieve you of sickness, poverty, and all earthly problems is totally false. Rather, God will get us through the fire, and when we exit the fire, we will be okay, we will be at peace. In fact, surviving and finding that we can continue in life with the knowledge that God has seen us through something terrible – this gives us confidence and brings us back to a state of joy. We feel a sense of empowerment when we survive tragedy, when we live through a period of anxiety, and then discover that we can put something terrible behind us because we have experienced God carrying us through. We also learn empathy for other people when things don't go great for us. You can't appreciate someone else's burdens when you have never had any of your own. History has shown us that the people who do the most for the world are rarely people who have lived gilded lives. We also learn just how much we do need God and how relatively worthless are things of this world. When money, success, and power can't make our problems go away, when the randomness of life still strikes us, we come to understand that God's grace does a lot more for us than earthly riches.

I talked to a man a while back. Let's call him George. He was sitting in the waiting area outside the O.R. A friend of his was getting major surgery done and George was waiting to see how it turned out. I had been sent to shoo him away because our Covid rules required that no one be sitting around the hospital in

public areas. All visitors were to remain in the rooms of the people they were visiting. Anyone who wanted to wait on someone in surgery had to wait outside the hospital for someone to call them with a status update. The man was very cooperative, even apologetic. He admitted to deliberately slipping by the security check at the front desk. He was maybe in his early forties. As he stood up one of his legs buckled and he looked lightheaded. He sat back down. I squatted down next to him. I asked him if I could get him help. George said no and that it was just the long-term effects of a rattlesnake bite. He told me that he was still suffering from fatigue related to having been “snakebit” and that he was also having some motor problems. He had been bitten on a hiking trail near Boulder and had been given antivenom at another hospital. George said that he was okay, that he needed to learn to not stand up so quickly. He was a little embarrassed. But since I was a nervous about him, I walked with him out of the hospital and to his car. As we were walking across the parking lot, I suggested that maybe he shouldn’t be driving, that perhaps he could call someone to pick him up. George said he could drive just fine. We stopped and chatted by his car for a few minutes. He said that he had been on a trail, alone, in the foothills, when he felt a sudden pain on his leg, looked down, and saw the rattlesnake with its teeth in him. It then let go and slithered away. He had no idea what to do and he started

to panic. But another hiker did know what to do. A young woman told him to sit on a rock and to stay still. She told him to just stay relaxed so that his heart rate would stay low; it was important, she said, to stop the venom from traveling quickly through his body. She told him to keep his leg low, well below his heart. Then she called 911. An older couple on the trail sat with him, helping him stay calm. He said that the woman, who was about seventy-five, held his hand. A teenager carried him to the trailhead, where the ambulance picked him up. Within a few minutes of getting to the emergency room, he had been given the antivenom. He was assured that he had gotten it in plenty of time to save his life, but they couldn't guarantee that he wouldn't have long-term effects.

I told him that I was very happy that he made it. Then he said that the incident had been, in a way, very positive. People who didn't know him interrupted their hikes to help him. The EMTs had been very reassuring and caring. He realized that most people in the world didn't have an emergency roomful of people waiting just to help them in their time of medical need. He said that he lived alone, and that instead of having his usual solitary walk on a trail, he ended up interacting with several very good people. It was a lot more rewarding than yet another hike alone, he said. Even though he was nervous about the long-term effects of the snakebite, it had reinforced his faith in people. He had

never wavered in his faith in God, just his faith in people. Then, he asked me to pray with him before I left. He said he wanted to offer a prayer of thanks. He had learned that when God guides us through something terrible, God will sometimes do more than reinforce our trust of God – God builds our trust in people.

I then described to George a story from the Book of Acts, the history of the spread of Christianity after the crucifixion of Jesus. It comes from near the end of the book. It tells us about a perilous journey that Paul took by ship. Paul was traveling across the Mediterranean Sea, westward, and was shipwrecked on the Island of Malta. Paul would have been killed if the centurion had not moved to save his life. The people on that island welcomed them and lit a fire to warm them up. But then this happens:

³ When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. ⁴ When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, “No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live.” ⁵ He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. ⁶ They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

Paul decides to be a good guest and helps with the fire. A snake, which has been attracted by the heat of the fire, bites him on the hand and doesn't let go.

Apparently, the “natives” who live there have some sort of pagan belief that

being bitten by a snake indicates that a man is a murderer. These people were polytheists who probably had developed this mythology to account for bad things happening to people who don't seem like they are evil. But then Paul takes the snake off his hand and tosses it into the fire. Paul doesn't get even get sick, let alone die, from the snake bite, so the natives decide that he must be a god. Clearly these folks are not Christians. Then, Paul successfully cures a number of sick people on the island. We assume that he also turns this into an opportunity to evangelize the residents of Malta and bring them into the Kingdom of God.

But here is the point of the story: God didn't stop Paul from being bitten by the snake. He also didn't stop George from being bit by a snake. There's a difference between the two stories, of course. Paul was able to perform a miracle on himself. George had to make something good happen the hard way, by putting up with the lasting effects of a snakebite and using his own positive outlook on life to turn it into something good. In both cases, though, we see that God doesn't stop bad things from happening, and in both cases, God worked to build the bonds between humans. I usually use the English Standard Version.

Here is the beginning of Psalm 133, from the New International Version:

*¹ How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!
² It is like precious oil poured on the head,*

*running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.
³ It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the LORD bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore.*

We don't think like the people who live on Malta, at least not the people who lived there during the time of Paul. We don't believe that someone must be a god when something good comes of a bad event. We know that good can easily come from something bad. We are willing to accept God's decision to not conceal us from bad things – and trust that God does this because it is in our best interest. Importantly, it does not mean that we must ignore true tragedy when it happens. I'm not minimizing what could be a long-term physical disability for George. And I applaud his ability to rise above something scary.

I saw George again. He was back in the hospital a few hours later, looking for Chaplain Buzz. His friend's surgery had had mixed results. The man was alive, but when the surgeon was operating on him, more medical issues were discovered. George's friend would have a chronic medical problem. He would need in home healthcare for several years, perhaps for the rest of his life. George was sad. He said that he didn't have many friends, and after all those people had helped him after being "snakebit", he wanted to help his friend from work. His

buddy had been very nervous, and George had done all he could to make him less anxious before his surgery. George had wanted badly to joyfully bring his friend home, with everything having turned out great. I told him that he could still take his friend home in joy. I said that this wouldn't be a simple ride home in joy like he had hoped. But, I said, have you told him about being "snakebit" and how you developed a deeper trust in people by having that happen?

George asked me if I was saying that his friend should look upon his bad news as an opportunity to connect with more people and develop trust in them? I said that the most important thing was to tell his friend that George would be there for him, that George would help him get whatever professional medical help he needed. And yes, he could advise his friend to trust not just God, but people, as well. That's one thing our society is missing right now. A true, deep, and sincere trust in our fellow humans – something that is very rare in the United States today. Don't forget that we are all made in God's image.

God, thank you for walking with us through the flood waters and through the fires of life. Thank you for turning bad things into opportunities to grow our trust in you and in other people. And God, most of all, during these times of great conflict, help us turn whatever bad things happen in life into opportunities for us to depend on each other and thereby learn to live in harmony. Amen.