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We are now entering the middle of March, and the extended summer season will end soon. This summer was very hot and humid across Australia. Because of the hot weather and mice population growth, there was high alert for snake ‘tsunami’ in many states. It was reported lots of snakes have appeared in backyards even in metropolitan residential areas, and there were many snake bite accidents this summer.

Last month, in Western Australia, a pregnant woman and her unborn baby died from an apparent snakebite around her house. Two months ago a man died after being bitten by a brown snake while trying to protect his dog in his backyard in Sydney.

According to the Guardian Newspaper, “More than half of the deaths caused by snake bites in Australia since 2000 have occurred in or around the victim’s home. Almost three-quarters of the victims were male, and 20% were bitten while trying to pick up or kill a snake.”

So, when you find a snake in your backyard, do not try to attack it; rather, call the reptile service. And one more: snakes are a protected species in Australia and it is illegal to kill or capture them without a permit.

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Today’s first Bible reading, Numbers 21:4-9, also contains a story of snakes. When the Israelites travelled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, they grew impatient on the way and complained against God and Moses.

They said to Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” Then, the Lord sent venomous snakes among them, and many people died of snakebites. The Israelites repented, and God gave them a way to be saved; that was putting a bronze snake up on a pole and looking at it.

Some of us may quickly ask, “Why a bronze snake? Did it have any healing power?” Of course, not. It was just a serpent-shaped sculpture. Then, why did God command to raise it up for people to look at it? This story is about the power of trust. God opened a way for salvation, and whether to live or die

totally depended on their trust. If they had believed in what God said, they would have been saved; otherwise, they would have just died.

This story gives us an insight into the divine passion for life. God’s zeal for our well-being is so strong, that his holy anger would sometimes erupt. However, his anger is not the dead end; he has always opened new doors for another chance to live well. For his passion for life is based on his love and trust towards us. Thus, his zeal for our well-being is a never ending story.

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In verse 7 there is a part worth our attention. It says, “The people came to Moses and said, ‘We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.’” The Israelites prayed to God through Moses to take the snakes away. But, remarkably, God did not take them away, but put a bronze serpent up on a pole instead.

The venomous snakes were a result of human ways of living for possession, while the bronze snake was a symbol of God’s way of living for life. If God had removed the snakes on that occasion, then unless they had changed their ways of living, they would have continued to endlessly suffer from other snakes.

In the end, this narrative is not only about a matter of trust, but also about a matter of decision. When we fully trust God and decide to change our ways of living and lead a new life following God, those snakes have nothing to do with us; they will go away from us by themselves.

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Interestingly, in today’s Gospel reading, John 3:14-21, Jesus described himself as the bronze snake lifted up. In verses 14-15 Jesus said: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be raised up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

At this point, Jesus talked about his death on the cross. The reason was clear; for everyone to have eternal life. The event of Jesus’ cross was also a matter of

trust and decision. Jesus made it clear that only believers could fully taste and enjoy God’s grace for salvation.

What’s remarkable here is that Jesus went a step further regarding trust and decision. Who can trust God completely and choose the divine way of living? He argues that only those who were born again can do that. In verse 3 Jesus said to Nicodemus who tried to follow God’s way, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

Then, what does it mean being born again? I grew up in an evangelical Presbyterian family and church, so I have listened to lots of sermons and studies of the topic. And I have had some spiritual experiences of being born again. But, it is still very difficult to explain it because it is spiritual and mysterious.

It has nothing to do with how long we have come to church or how much knowledge of God we have obtained. Even Nicodemus, one of the influential religious scholars of the day, could not understand the meaning. He asked Jesus, “How can someone be born when they are old? It is impossible.”

At that, Jesus gave him a very famous account, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the spirit.” That is, we can feel and experience the movement of the Spirit in our lives and how he works, but we cannot fully explain the divine mystery.

However, we can get a clue for better understanding from the original Aramaic word Jesus used as he must have selected the best term in the language for the spiritual happening. The Aramaic word translated into ‘again’ is ‘*men derish*,’ and this word is important.

The word *men derish* means ‘from the beginning.’ So, being born again is directly related to restoration to original state. Also the word signifies ‘from above,’ which lets us know the spiritual event can start from above, not from below, from God, not from us. The image of spilling clean water into a glass full of contaminated water might show us a clear picture of what ‘born again’ means.

When we keep spilling fresh water from above into a glass of contaminated water, the dirty water will overflow out of the cup and in the end the clean water will fill the container. Then the fresh water can be given to those who are thirsty, watered on the dry garden, and used as priming water for God’s life ministry.

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Sisters and brothers,

Life for us can be like living in the wilderness full of venomous snakes. We try to step on their heads and remove them ~~away~~, but are likely to be bitten, suffer, and even die. We pray to God to take them away, but do not realise that they have come out of our greed and injustice. God raised a bronze snake up to save and reform us, but the world says it is nonsense to be healed only by looking at it with belief.

This is where we stand and live. What’s certain is, however, that the way of salvation was already offered to us through the amazing sacrifice of Jesus, and it is now our decision whether to take it following God’s way or not. Amen.