Once, during a systematic theology class our professor asked us why the sacrificial system of the Old Testament worked. For a quick refresher the sacrificial system was the Jewish system where sacrificing an animal forgave your sins. The class tried its best to explain how the killing an animal wiped the slate clean but ultimately no one could come up with a satisfying answer. The correct answer turned out to be that the system worked because God said that it worked. It is a somewhat obvious point but can be something we often forget. Not in terms of sacrificing animals but rather in how our relationship with God works. We can spend a lot of time editorializing and trying to explain exactly why things are the way they are and forget to focus on God. And so, what ends up happening is our thoughts about God and how He operates become an end in themselves and form a barrier between us and the real God. But like I learned in my systematic theology class, sometimes things work in a certain way because God says they work that way. Now, I am not saying that we are to abandon our reason and become mindless sheep. Rather my point is that we need to have some humility and realize that like Isaiah tells us God’s ways are not our ways. Meaning, we may not always understand and that is okay. And I say all of this as an introduction because of two related items in our Old Testament and Gospel lessons. They both give us examples of things God does that we cannot quite explain. And if this all sounds a little esoteric, I promise I have a point.

The first item comes during the 40 years of wandering in the desert by the Israelites. As was fairly typical during this period the Israelites were whining about their situation and asking Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” God gets a little annoyed with this incessant grousing and sends serpents to bite them, killing many as a result. Moses, who must have had a tremendous amount of patience, prays for this to stop. God listens and tells him, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” Moses obeys and then we hear, “whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.” So why does a serpent of bronze on a stick save people from death by snakebite? Well, just like my opening illustration it works because God says that it works. Now, unless you are not the best of housekeepers and your home is a haven for poisonous serpents, I am guessing this passage, while interesting, may not be very germane to your life. So that gets us to the second passage, which is more germane to our lives and is from the Gospel. The statement comes from Jesus and occurs right before the famous God so loved the world part of John’s Gospel. Jesus says, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Jesus takes the episode of the snake on a stick and applies it to himself while expanding what will happen as a result. In the story of Moses, the bronze serpent was the cure for one very specific thing – snake bites. Jesus, however enlarges the image beyond snake bites and applies it to our mortal nature, telling us that when he is lifted up those who believe in him will have eternal life. Like much of Jesus’ ministry it is the same but better. And just in case you were wondering, the lifting up is the crucifixion.

So, I want to take a moment and think about what Jesus was saying in terms of the snake on a stick we have in the Old Testament. We talked about the fact that this worked for snake bites because God said it worked and I think we can say much of the same thing about the crucifixion. I, of course realize that there are all sorts of theories about why the crucifixion did what it did, that is set us right with God. These theories have names like substitutionary atonement, ransom theory, recapitulation, penal substitution and so on. But I do not want to get into all of that or actually any of that except to say that there are many ways people across the past 2,000 have tried to explain how the death and resurrection of Jesus has set us right with God. And the main reason I do not want to go into them, besides time is that if I went in to explain the details of these various theories there might be some that you like and there might be some that you dislike. And so, the danger becomes that the theories take on the appearance of the actual thing. That is, we end up evaluating God based on the way He has been explained. The explanation takes on the characteristics of God.

Let me go back to the story in Numbers to explain what I mean. Let’s say that after Moses came and announced to the Israelites that the bronze serpent would cure them, he decided to add an explanation, saying the reason it would work was because it was made of bronze. Of course, God does not say this but for purposes of this example let’s say Moses did this editorializing on why the snake on the stick worked. Now since I am just making stuff up let’s say that as a result of this pronouncement, a schism developed. Those who like things made of bronze readily embraced what God did and those who had had bad childhood experiences with bronze refused because of their disdain for this alloy. So, what ends up happening is that Moses in trying to explain how the snake thing worked created not just a divide but may have prevented people from seeing God because they were focused on Moses’ theory of bronze. His theory would have placed something between the Israelites and God’s power. And that can be the problem with some of our theories. When we think we are explaining God we might be creating impediments to ours and other’s faith. Like I said, we focus on something that is not God and miss the actual God; just as with my stupid example where people were judging bronze while believing they were judging God.

When I was in High School and going through my atheist stage, I watched a lot of televangelists. Partly this was because YouTube did not exist but partly because it was a way for me to justify my lack of belief. These televangelists often had such ludicrous pronouncement that they were easy to reject. But the fact of the matter was that while I thought I was rejecting God I was really just rejecting the guy trying to sell me a magic handkerchief over which he had prayed that would heal my gout. Often it is best for the Church to simply get out of the way and let God be God. He does not need our help. I know that we humans have a strong desire to understand, but to understand God we have to bring Him down to our level. And when we bring God to our level, He gets mixed up with the stuff we like and don’t like. And if I can just end with a plug for why we do what we do in Church. One of the things that made me fall in love with the Episcopal service was it allowed space for God. It was not like my televangelist friends in the 80’s who talked and talked and placed themselves between me and God. The Episcopal service in many ways invites us into the mystery of God and lets us see that God’s ways are not our ways. We may not always understand and that is okay. For we are called to be humble and, in our humility, we are able to participate in the wonder and magnificence of God so that we may be his own this day and forevermore.