



Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 11, 2018 – 9:00 a.m.

Rev. Todd Goldschmidt, Pastor

Theme: IN CHRIST, THE SNAKEBITE OF SIN IS OVERCOME!

Sermon Text: Numbers 21:4-9 (NIV)

⁴[The Israelites] traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “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!”

⁶Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷The 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.” So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” ⁹So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

Have you ever been bitten by a snake? **(If someone has been, ask that person to describe the experience. If not, then continue with sermon.)** Snakes can be extremely deadly! Did you read about the Burmese python that swallowed an entire deer in Florida? Here's a snapshot of the story from **USA Today** online:

While tracking pythons in Collier Seminole State Park . . . a group of wildlife biologists . . . and land managers from the state park stumbled upon an unsettling discovery: An 11-foot Burmese python that had devoured a white-tailed deer fawn weighing more than the snake. The 2015 finding . . . is believed to be the largest python-to-prey ratio documented to date, with the snake weighing 31.5 lbs. and the deer 35 lbs.

Incredible! Snakes have been around since the dawn of time, and humans have always had a tenuous relationship with them. Just ask Adam and Eve! The devil disguised himself as a serpent in Eden and tempted them to disobey God by eating fruit from **“the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”** about which God had expressly warned them: **“for when you eat of it, you will surely die”** (Gen. 2:17). Satan sowed his seeds of doubt in Eve’s mind, getting her to question God’s intentions and integrity in withholding the fruit of that tree from His creatures, and succeeded in transforming an object that God had made verboten into a tantalizingly tasty treat in Eve’s mind’s eye. We read in Genesis 3: **“When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it”** (vv. 6-7).

Yet, in His amazing grace, the Lord came looking for His disobedient children to call them to account for their sin and to issue them the first promise of a Savior to come. While addressing the devil, God said: **“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel”** (Gen. 3:15). Jesus of Nazareth is that promised **“offspring”** of Eve who came to undo the damage that the devil did centuries beforehand when he infected God’s perfect world with death, decay and destruction via his venomous lies. But more on that later.

For now, we turn our attention back to our sermon text. For nearly forty years, God had met the physical and spiritual needs of His wandering people, Israel, as they traversed the desert between Egypt and Canaan. At last, they were on the cusp of claiming that Promised Land for themselves! They were understandably bedraggled. But the events of our text that occur near **“Mount Hor”** prove just how stubborn, hard-hearted and ungrateful they were! Moses writes: **“the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “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!”** So, God responded in kind. If they were going to carp and moan about His providence, He’d send them something to really upset their applectart: **“venomous snakes”**! And when those slithering assassins sunk their poison-filled fangs into God’s children, Moses reports that **“many of the Israelites died.”** What an obvious consequence for their sin God *graciously* sent their way that day! They instantly realized what was happening.

So, they **“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.” So Moses prayed for the people.”**

Some might categorize God’s actions here as knee-jerk or even sadistic. But it was neither. It was *well thought out*, and *uber-loving*. It had the exact effect God intended: it brought His wandering people back to Him in sincere repentance. God offered a simple solution to His people’s pleas and Moses’ intercessory prayer. We read, **“The LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.’ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.”** But would they trust His pledge? If so, they’d **LOOK, AND LIVE!** If not, they’d perish, painfully, in their obstinate

unbelief. The cure for their rebellion, the antidote for their sin, was raised on a pole above the camp!

It's relatively easy for us to criticize the Israelites for their ingratitude. After all, hadn't God given them manna and quail daily and miraculously afforded them water many times? God reminded His people: **"During the forty years that I lead you through the wilderness, your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet"** (Deut. 29:5). But we grouse about far smaller issues! We stress out about future events over which we have absolutely no control, instead of trusting in the One who's been in that day ere He **"created the heavens and the earth"** (Gen. 1:1).

In His *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus reminds us that our **"heavenly Father knows"** what we **"need"** even before we ask. You can almost hear the tenderness in Jesus' voice when He says, **"But seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own"** (Matt. 6:32b-34). Let those words of your Savior lighten your load and lift the burden of believing that you have to orchestrate the events of your life in such a way that you can cope with the stressful people and situations you deal with. Let God be God. Let Him do His job. He's been doing it flawlessly for eons without our help! Rest assured, **"that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose"** (Rom. 8:28).

The Lord graciously offered the solution for His people. Believing in His promise, they could look at the **"bronze snake"** and live! Some heeded God's Word, saw what He did and quit grumbling. They stopped speaking out against the Lord and against His servant, Moses, and trusted in them. Through their faith, they were saved from certain death. As they believed, they turned to the ensign of their salvation and were healed!

But what about those who continue to be bitten by snakes—and not the earthly kind—those who suffer the poisonous effects of sin and evil, the venom of Satan's lies and their own misguided depravity? What about them? And what about us? Where do they turn? Where do we turn? Where can we look and live? Like it or not, we suffer much like the Israelites did. We're struck by sin, death and Satan's deceptions, too. Our afflictions may be the result of our complaining, of disrespecting God and refusing to carry out His will.

We also reject the care and protection God offers us in His Word and Sacraments. And then there are those times when we can't explain the suffering we're going through—the random snake bite—the seemingly senseless affliction that happens in this off-kilter world.

So, who do we turn to at such times? Where can we look and live? Jesus would tell us what He told Nicodemus when He pointed him back to the events of our text in our Gospel Lesson for today. He told him: **"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him"** (John 3:14-15). Jesus identifies Himself as the ensign of salvation! Those stricken by the snakebite of sin, victims of Satan's venom, are to look to Him who was also **"lifted up"** on a pole—the pole of the cross! There, *and only there*, will we find forgiveness and redemption!

The **"bronze snake"** cured the problem the venomous asps caused the Israelites. But Jesus says that He's the solution to the universal problem that the serpent, Satan, brought into the once perfect world. He's the promised Serpent-Crusher, who brings righteousness to all who lacked it and life to all who were destined to everlasting condemnation. Jesus acts like that statue in the wilderness, but what He brings is of far greater benefit. It's not simply a temporal cure, but an eternal one for those who are led by His Spirit to look on Him with the eyes of faith. Our Gospel records this eternal benefit Christ brings in familiar words:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (Jn. 3:16-17).

There’s ample reason for God to condemn the world, just as there was ample reason for Him to slay the Israelites at Mount Hor. But, in mercy, He acts in a far different way, offering salvation in His only Son. In Jesus, life comes to a poisoned people in the eternal antidote produced at the cross and empty tomb. For as the merits of Christ’s death and resurrection are dispensed to us in Baptism, in the promises of God’s Word and in His Holy Supper, the venom of sin is thwarted and we, who **Look To Jesus, Live!** We’re no longer destined for death. We no longer have reason to complain or speak against our gracious God, for He’s delivered life to us and set us on the path to Paradise! As the Apostle Paul assures us: **“there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set [us] free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:1)**! In Him we live! In Him, we rejoice—now and forever! Amen.