

Text: Numbers 21:4-9

Theme: Look Up and Live

Date: March 17, 2024 (Lent 4b)

In the Name of Christ Jesus, Dear Christian Friends,

Troublesome People

The Old Testament children of Israel were a troublesome sort of people. They were troublesome for their earthly leader Moses as they complained about their boring diet and lack of water. They were also troublesome for their God who had rescued them from slavery in Egypt. In the midst of these troublesome lives, we have a most unusual event recorded in the Bible. God told Moses, **MAKE A SNAKE AND PUT IT UP ON A POLE; ANYONE WHO IS BITTEN CAN LOOK AT IT AND LIVE.** And so, we may wonder to ourselves: *“Why a snake? Why put it up on a pole? Why ask people to look at a snake on a pole in order to live? What could God possibly have had in mind for these troublesome people?”* Our Gospel lesson for today gives us the clearest and most important clue in understanding this unusual command when it says, *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15).* By referring to our Old Testament text in this way, Jesus himself showed Nicodemus and us that the snake on the pole in the desert was actually a picture or type of Christ himself. When it comes to our eternal salvation, God wants us to **look up and live**; look up to him and Son Jesus Christ in faith and live eternally with him in heaven.

Setting the Stage in the Lives of the Israelites

It had been forty long years of disciplinary wandering in the semi-arid, rough countryside of the Sinai Peninsula since the LORD had brought the Israelites out from under the heavy-handed rule of the pharaoh of Egypt. Many of the Israelites could re-tell the stories of...

- How the LORD God had divided the Red Sea and brought them out of slavery in Egypt.
- How he had given them battle victories over the desert kings.
- How he had turned bitter water sweet and created a fountain of water flowing out of a dusty desert rock.
- How he had provided special food from heaven every day and for forty years kept their sandals and robes from wearing out.

Yet, in spite of all that God had done for his people, we read in our text: **BUT 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 DESERT? THERE IS NO BREAD! THERE IS NO WATER! AND WE DETEST THIS MISERABLE FOOD!”** The Israelites were not just complaining about Moses and their diet. They were complaining about God; that he wasn't taking good enough care of them. They were doubting God's care and not trusting in his perfect love for them. **That's when God sent venomous snakes** to make them realize that questioning God and complaining about his appointed leader Moses was sinful. God sent poisonous snakes among them, and many Israelites were bitten and died.

The “Snakebite” of Our Sin

When we witness the sinful attitudes of God's Old Testament believers, we can't help but see ourselves wearing their same sandals and robes, doubting and complaining with their same sinful hearts. A grumbling and complaining heart reveals a lack of trust in God's care. **Have we ever doubted or questioned God's ways or God's care for our lives?** When we grumble and complain about how God is treating us, we sin against God's First Commandment. God First Commandment teaches that we should fear, love, and trust in him above all things. But when we grumble and complain we are doubting God's gracious care for our lives. We are not trusting him above all things. Sometimes God in his wisdom allows there to be consequences in our life as a result of our grumbling and complaining. **Sometimes there will be “snakes” that bite us.** The ultimate snakebite is spiritual death in the depths of hell. But as Jesus taught in our Gospel lesson, that's the snakebite that God in his mercy has rescued us from.

The Snake in the Garden

When we think of how venomous snakes were used to bring physical pain and suffering into the lives of the Israelites, we cannot help but be reminded of how a “snake” brought spiritual pain and sorrow into the lives of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. When God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden, he gave them abundant blessings along with one

command. There were not to eat fruit from the tree in the middle of the Garden for if they would eat of it, they would surely die. It was there in the Garden then that Satan took on the form of a snake and tempted Adam and Eve to doubt God's care for them. When Adam and Eve doubted God's promises, they sinned and brought on themselves and the whole world the deadliest of all "snakebites", the "snakebite" of sin which is death.

Look Up in Repentance

When the people saw the consequences of their sin, they had a change of heart and turned to the LORD in repentance and greater faith. When the heavy anvil of guilt dropped onto their souls, they came to Moses and confessed: WE SINNED WHEN WE SPOKE AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST YOU. PRAY THAT THE LORD WILL TAKE THE SNAKES AWAY FROM US. God had every reason to condemn the Israelites, but in his incredible mercy he found a way to take the sting of death out of the snakebites. In the words of our text, 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, HE LIVED. The mere act of looking up to the bronze snake on the pole did not cure the people of the poisonous venom, but looking up in faith and trusting in God's perfect power to help did indeed bring healing and comfort.

The Promise of God

God's loving care for the Israelites was not his first nor even his greatest act of mercy. When Adam and Eve listened to a snake in the Garden and doubted God's Word, the LORD God in love promised to raise up on the pole of the cross his own Son who would take on himself the poisonous venom of sin for all the world. In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus said to Nicodemus, "*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. 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.*"

A Picture or Type of Christ

When Jesus taught Nicodemus and others about God's love for all the world, he used this picture from Old Testament to reveal the grace and mercy of his Father in heaven. The striking parallels between this Old Testament account of the bronze snake and the events that took place on Good Friday are not a coincidence.

- In the desert, the bronze snake was lifted up on a pole.
- On Mount Calvary, Jesus was lifted up on the cross.
- Whoever trusted God's promise of relief from poison by looking up to the bronze snake lived.
- Whoever believes in God's promise of relief from sin by looking up to Jesus lives forever.
- ✓ In the desert, the bronze snake seemed like such a simple remedy.
- ✓ Today, people who hear of God's gift of forgiveness through Jesus often say the same, "That sounds so easy!" But remember, it is easy for us, but look up at the cross, and know that it was not easy for Jesus!

Only Jesus

While there may be many pictures of Christ found in the bronze snake, the bronze snake to did not remove a single sin. Only Jesus did. The Bible says, "*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we become the righteousness of God.*" On the pole of the cross two thousand years ago, God put my guilty, my grumbling, my complaining, my doubting, my punishment, my death, my hell – all the consequences of my sins and yours, on Jesus, the only Savior of the world.

Conclusion

The troublesome Israelites, even though the grumbled and complained, didn't really want to go back to the oppression and slavery in Egypt. Once they saw the consequences of their complaining, once they looked up in faith to the snake on the pole and were healed – they never mentioned going back to Egypt again.

What about you? What about me? When we look up to Jesus and see him beaten and bleeding, crying and dying, do we really want to go back to the slavery of our past sins? God encourages us to **Look Up and Live!** May God give each of us the grace to turn away from sin and look up at Jesus and see the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.