

Pastor T.C. Arnold
6th Sunday of Easter
Numbers 21:4-9
May 6th, 2018

Today is known in the church as Rogate Sunday. This word has to do with prayers and litany that were spoken or chanted by the people of God who are in need. The story of how this Sunday came into use begins way back in 466 A.D. There was great distress throughout Europe as a result of earthquakes and other harsh calamities. The Bishop of Vienna, a man named Claudius, decreed that the first three days before the Ascension festival should serve as a period of prayer and processions in the church and in the fields to call on God to remove the sufferings of the people. Gradually this custom came into usage in other places, and in 591 it was prescribed for the whole Christian church. Thus, the Sunday before Ascension Day known as Rogate Sunday became a special prayer Sunday of the year, and the week beginning with this Sunday became the week of prayer.

For sure in the church today, we still see these calamities. Sure natural disasters occur... but even more. Terrorist attack unsuspecting people. Cultural values diminish and the voice of the church and those who speak the truth in love are called unloving and out of touch with what the world is today. And even the family is under attack. Family used to be the central institution for the sake of society and the church, but now it is seen as outdated and undefinable. There are many struggles for the church today. There are many struggles and problems for the families that are in the church today. For that reason, perhaps the prayers of God's people should be on our lips all the more this week. What could you pray for? Who could you pray for? Jesus on our lips and on our hearts during days of great distress.

Speaking of great distress, consider the Old Testament reading appointed for this day. The children of Israel hated the desert. I can't say that I blame them. I've been stuck in the desert before – for about 4 or 5 hours when our car broke down near Phoenix, Arizona. Even though this happened a long time ago, I still remember the apprehension we felt over the fact that we were a long way from people and it was very hot and dry. We had very little water. There was no food. When situations become dire, we call out and speak our mind. We want to blame someone. It causes a fire in our belly and our blood boils. And so it was for the children of Israel as well.

This account of the fiery serpents biting the Israelites in the wilderness is quite interesting. It's hard to know what to make of it at first glance. However, when we take into account what is central to the Scriptures, it becomes clear. Jesus is at the heart and core of all the Scriptures from Genesis through Revelation. It's all about Jesus. The reason, because He is the enactor of our Salvation. He brings the dead back to life. He heals the wounded. He hears the prayers of those in distress and administers His salve of salvation. It's always been about Jesus because man cannot stand in the presence of God in our sinful condition. We cannot be saved apart from Him. So God, in His mercy, has given us His Son to die. That story is central to every other story in all the Bible.

So now, let's examine the account. This way we understand it through the lens of Jesus the Son. The Israelites were bitten by snakes that the Lord Himself caused to bite them because of their disobedience. There is no getting around this. This was punishment for their sins. Sin bites! Your sin bites. It has ruined you. You will die because the poison of sin in your blood has spread to every vessel in your body and there no good part in you. Your heart is infected as well.

Here's how we know this. The heart desires what it wants apart from God's will. Your heart lies to you and tells you to follow it no matter what – even when it strays away from God's Word. This is how we justify our sins. We tell ourselves that our heart would never lie to us. It can't be against God's will... He will want this for me because this makes me happy... so I'm sure He's okay with it. It's not true. God's will is clear. For that, according to the law, we go to the Ten Commandments. He tells us what His will for our lives really is. If you find that you aren't measuring up, then you need to repent and turn away from sin and toward God's will for you. If you think you have nothing to repent of and that I'm talking to everyone else in this room but you, you need to repent of that because we are all sinners and have fallen short of the glory of the Lord.

But here is the good news, beloved in the Lord! God rescues us, just like He did the children of Israel in the desert. Their misbelief that God will provide for them – though He already promised this and the people didn't listen – was punished. Sin is punished. But God provides the cure. Moses puts a pole up with a bronze snake on it. They are to look at it and live. But here comes our fallen heart telling how this could be once again. Luther put it this way: The children of Israel might have thought: “Ha, what a ridiculous medicine it is that you propose for the sting and bite of the serpents! Moses, have you lost your senses? How are we to be helped by looking at this bronze serpent, which looks like those that bit us? We are so terrified that we cannot stand in the sight of them! If only you would, instead, give us a drink, a cooling water, to take away the venom and the fever! What good can mere words and looking do? How can that dead and lifeless object up there benefit us?”

This is the point. Just looking at the serpent did not affect the cure. It was faith in the Word that did it. They inclined their sinful heart to the Lord's Word and this reliable promise of healing and deliverance from poison was administered as medicine for their lives. This bronze snake is Jesus on the pole... on the cross... to which the eyes of faith gaze upon it's gift of life now manifest to us in the Word before you and the sacraments given to you.

You see, the fire is the poison of sin. They were not snakes on fire. Their venom burns. It hurts severely as it courses through your veins. There is no remedy except through the one we look to... have faith in... the one who took all the poison into His body on the cross. The one who had no sin, but became sin for you and me. And now our gaze of faith upon our Savior who has been lifted up on that tree is the true treasure and gift that gives us everything we do not deserve.

For these calamities, during this Rogate week, let our hearts be inclined to prayer. Between now and Ascension Day, plan to pray. Pray for others who need your prayers. Use the bulletin today to guide your discipline. Pray for your family, for your heart. For God's will to be done in your life. For God's mercy in the midst of hardship. For a repentant heart that turns away from sin and toward the will of God. Be with me in prayer this week. It's a good week to do it. The church has been in prayer during these last days of Easter for 1700 years. Set aside time to pray this week and then join us for Ascension Day Service on Thursday evening and receive His gift of Holy Communion.

This story in Numbers 21 is not about snakes, it's not about the people of Israel, and not even about Moses. It's about Jesus. He took our poison into Himself to cleanse you from all unrighteousness. Your sins received into Him and His blood poured out for you. Thank God that a story like this is about the one who gives you life. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and mind in Christ Jesus. Amen.