

March 11, 2018
Sermon for Fourth Sunday in Lent
St Peter Lutheran Church
Bowie, TX
Larry Knobloch, Pastor
Numbers 21:4-9

J.J.- Jesu Juva—Help me, Jesus

Numbers 21:4–9 (ESV)

⁴ From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” ⁶ Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷ And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Grace, Mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Amen.

Serpents have caused great problems for mankind since the fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden. I've often said that I have no problem with snakes, or even lizards...as long as I see them before they see me!

As it was in the beginning and so it is now, but it never shall be world without end.

For God also made a promise just after the fall in Genesis 3:15. “[The Christ] shall bruise [the serpent’s] head, and [the serpent] shall bruise [the Christ’s] heel” (Gen 3:15).

The fiery serpents near Mount Hor struck the heels of the Israelites, bringing death with their mouths, just as the serpent had spoken the death-causing lie to Eve. But in the garden and in the wilderness, there was no one to crush the heads of those serpents. So the devil appeared to have won.

You heard that “*the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died*” (v 6).

The event near Mount Hor was divine punishment for the unbelief of the Lord God’s people. Though the Lord had brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and had provided for their welfare during their journey, “*the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses*” (vv 4–5). After nearly forty years of God providing for their needs, they again complained about the situation that they were in.

They were weary of the travel, and they complained about the food that God gave them each day.

They had rejected the divine gifts of God.

The source of life has been rejected and human wisdom has been substituted for God's divine will. And God sent the serpents to call the people to repentance.

The people knew better, yet they grumbled against God anyway. In His wisdom, God knew what needed to be done to bring His people to repentance. Sometimes you have to slap people in the face to get their attention. And when the Israelites realized what they had done, they recognized their guilt: "*We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us*" (v 7).

The Israelites' despair at God's discipline had turned them back in repentance to the one who was their Deliverer and Provider.

It was not the Lord's will to kill all the Israelites in the wilderness. He had made a promise, a covenant with them, one that He would keep, even as His people were unfaithful.

God hears what His people say in repentance. And He provides a remedy for what afflicts them. In the wilderness, the Lord does not provide something to crush the serpents striking the Israelites, but He does give them a remedy that removes the serpents' venom: "*And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live'*" (v 8).

Life is given in the midst of human death:

“So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live” (v 9).

The solution was given for the problem the Israelites faced. Believing in the Lord God’s promise, they could look at the statue and live. Once again, the Israelites were restored. Now the bronze serpent was not the solution, not an idol, but merely a symbol that pointed to God’s promise.

They heard what the Lord said and saw what He did, and this time they did not grumble and complain. They did not speak out against God nor Moses, but believed and trusted them. And through faith, they were saved.

As they believed, they looked to the ensign of salvation and received it. But what about those who continue to be bitten by serpents, and not the earthly kind?

What about those who suffer the poisonous effects of sin and evil, the venom of Satan’s lies and their own depravity? Who do they turn to?

Where can they look to be saved?

You suffer like the Israelites in the wilderness. You are struck by sin, death, and Satan. Your afflictions may be the result of your grumbling and complaining, your speaking against the Lord God. Other times, it’s the result of your unbelief, your rejection of the providence of God and his acts of redemption. And still other times, it’s simply the *random* snakebite, the unexplained affliction that happens in this off-kilter and crazy world.

So, who do these people turn for aid? What has been set up for you to look at?

That is what Jesus tells you: “*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*” (Jn 3:14–15).

Jesus identifies Himself as the sign of salvation. Those stricken by sin, victims of Satan’s venom, are to look to Him who was lifted on a pole, on a cross, and there they will find forgiveness and redemption.

The bronze serpent remedied the problem that the wilderness serpents caused the Israelites. But Jesus says that He is the solution to the universal problem that the serpent brought into the world beginning at Eden.

Jesus is the promised serpent-crusher, the one who brings righteousness to those who lacked it and life to those who were destined for condemnation and death. Jesus acts like that statue in the wilderness, but what he brings to effect is of much greater benefit. It is not simply a temporal aid, but an eternal one.

The Gospel of John records this eternal benefit that Jesus brings. Many of you know these words of Jesus so well: “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*” (vv 16–17).

There are plenty of reasons for the Lord God to condemn the world, just as there was for God to condemn all the Israelites in the wilderness.

But in mercy, the Lord God acts in a much different way, bringing salvation to a dying, poisoned world.

Life comes to you poisoned people, an eternal antidote produced from the fruit of the tree of the cross. For as the merits of Christ's death and resurrection are dispensed to you through Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, Holy Word, and Holy Supper, the venom of sin is counteracted and you are revived.

You are no longer destined for death. You have reason to complain or speak out against the Lord God. He has delivered life to you and set you on a path to Paradise.

There was ample reason for your condemnation, but the Lord God waives it since His Son has removed your guilt, crushed your accuser, and given you the newness of life. His will for you has been carried out.

The ancient serpent, the one who leads people to eternal death, has been crushed. And you have been provided salvation as you look to Him who was lifted up to give you life. *"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"* (vv 14–15).

It had to be that way, so that you who were poisoned by sin may live. And so what had been promised for us men and for our salvation has been done by Jesus.

The Snakebite of Sin Is Overcome.

It is finished! He has borne your guilt. Look to the cross of Christ and believe that Jesus Christ is God's Son, the one who has reconciled the world to the Father.

In Christ we live!

Rejoice!

Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Amen.

S.D.G.—Soli Deo Gloria

Sermon Outline

See and Live

Numbers 21:4-9

- I. God overcame the snakebite when the children of Israel sinned by rejecting Him.
- II. Christ has overcome the venomous bite of the devil inflicted on us in our sin.
- III. There is every reason to condemn, but in His mercy, God sends salvation in His Son.