

LOOK AND LIVE
Sermon for the 4th Sunday in Lent, 2018
Numbers 21:4-9

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the First Reading from before, Numbers 21:4-9: ⁴ **Then they journeyed from Mount Hor on the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom, but the people grew impatient on the way.** ⁵ **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 bread or water, and we detest this wretched food.”**

⁶ **Then the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people. They bit the people, and many of the people of Israel died.** ⁷ **Then the people came to Moses, and said: “We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that He may take the snakes away from us!”**

So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ **The LORD told Moses: “Make a fiery snake and put it on a pole! Anyone who has been bitten should look at it! Then he will live.”**

⁹ **Therefore Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then, when anyone who had been bitten by a snake looked at the bronze snake, he lived.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Snakes have caused great problems for mankind, and it all began in the Garden of Eden. They’re among the few creatures that have no legs and crawl on their bellies. Some theologians surmise that the original snake before the fall was beautiful and even walked upright; they also surmise that communication between man and animal was quite normal. Whether they did or not, doesn’t matter, but in chapter 3 of Genesis we are told that *the snake*

was more cunning than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made, (v.1). This intelligent animal was the one Satan chose to use as his instrument to drive a wedge between God and His children.

The evil snake, Satan, continues today in every attempt to lead people away from God. Thank God then, for the promise given to mankind there in the Garden, *He (Christ) will crush your head, and you will crush His heel,* (Gen. 3:15). The **poisonous snakes** near Mount Hor struck the heels of the Israelites, bringing death with their mouths, just as the snake had spoken the death-causing lie to Eve.

Today we heard that **the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people. They bit the people, and many of the people of Israel died.** For over four hundred years, the Israelites had been in Egypt. While there, a score of generations had died in slavery. Once freed from slavery, another generation had, by and large, died on the journey to get to this point. Now, the Israelites were not too far away from entering and possessing the Promised Land for which they had hoped for so long. However, it appeared that the king of Edom had seemingly clobbered their plan. The Israelites **journeyed from Mount Hor on the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom.** Because the king of Edom refused passage to the Israelites, their route took them southward toward the Gulf of Aqaba and eastward toward the Arabian desert. Though the Lord had brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and had provided for their welfare during their journey, yet because the route was not the direct one, **the people grew impatient on the way. They spoke against God and against Moses.**

After nearly forty years of God providing for their needs, they again complained about the situation that they were in. ⁵ **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 bread or water, and we detest this wretched food.”** The Hebrew word for “detestable” is even stronger: an “abomination.” The Israelites are calling God’s provisions abominable, which can literally be rendered as “to make one sick to the stomach.” God’s quail and manna were sickening to their stomachs!

This disregard for holy food was not just an insult; it was downright rebellion against God and Moses. This abomination was making desolate all of God's goodness and mercy. They had rejected the providence of God and His acts of deliverance, and in their complaining mood, they were blind to the many gifts God was giving them.

For such people, there is nothing but death. The source of life has been rejected and human wisdom has been substituted for divine will. Thus, **the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people. They bit the people, and many of the people of Israel died.** God sent forth the snakes to call the people to repentance, and when the Israelites realised that, they recognised their guilt: **The people came to Moses, and said: "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that He may take the snakes away from us!"** The Israelites' despair had turned them back in penitence to the One who was their Deliverer and Provider. They recognised the chastisement from God and confessed their sin of discontent.

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. The LORD God hears what His people say in repentance, and to them He provides a remedy for what afflicts them. In the wilderness, the Lord God does not provide something to crush the snakes striking the Israelites, but He does give them a *remedy* that removes the snakes' venom: **⁸ The LORD told Moses: "Make a fiery snake and put it on a pole! Anyone who has been bitten should look at it! Then he will live."** Life is given in the midst of human death: **⁹ Therefore Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then, when anyone who had been bitten by a snake looked at the bronze snake, he lived.**

The solution was given for the problem the Israelites faced. Believing in the LORD God's promise, the simple act of looking at a bronze snake raised up on a pole caused the dying rebels to be healed and live. Once again, the Israelites were restored. They heard what the LORD God said and saw what He did, and this time they did not grumble and complain. They did not speak out against Moses and the LORD God but believed and trusted them. Through faith, they

were saved. As they believed, they looked to the ensign of salvation and received it.

But what of those who *continue* to be bitten by snakes, and not the earthly kind? What of those who suffer the poisonous effects of sin and evil, the venom of Satan's lies and their own depravity? To whom do they turn? Where can they look to be saved? You too suffer like the Israelites in the wilderness. You too 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 chaotic cosmos.

So, to whom do these people turn for aid? What has been set up for you to look at? That is what Jesus tells you: ¹⁴ *As Moses **lifted up the snake** in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,* ¹⁵ *so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life,* (John 3:14–15). Jesus identifies Himself as the ensign of salvation. The bronze snake prefigured Christ's crucifixion. Those stricken by sin, victims of Satan's venom, are to look to Him who was lifted on a pole, and there they will find forgiveness and redemption. The simple act of looking up at Jesus raised up on the "pole" of the cross for our sins causes us who are dying from sin to be healed and live. In Christ Jesus, through faith in His promise to forgive us of all our sins through His death and resurrection from the dead three days later, we are healed and will live with Him forever in the promised land of heaven! Our Father in heaven sees us as valuable and precious - worthy of His own precious Son's life.

The bronze snake remedied the problem that the wilderness snakes caused the Israelites. But Jesus says that He is the solution to the universal problem that the snake brought into the world beginning at Eden. Jesus is the promised snake-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 bronze snake on a pole, 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: ¹⁶ *For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life.* ¹⁷ *For God has not sent His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world may be saved through Him,* (v. 16-17). There is ample reason for the Lord God to condemn the world, just as there was for God to kill all the Israelites in the wilderness. But in mercy, the Lord God acts in a much different way, bringing salvation to a dying, poisoned cosmos. God's love brings results. He offered the ultimate sacrifice for the world He loved. He gave His only Son. This giving, however, meant more than having Him born of a virgin mother and hailed as Saviour. God gave His Son as the necessary sacrifice for the world's sins. God gave His only Son for the cross.

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 no longer are destined for death. You no longer 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 snake, Satan, the one who leads people to eternal death, has been crushed. You have been provided salvation as you look to Him who was lifted up to give you life. ¹⁴ *As Moses **lifted up the snake** in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,* ¹⁵ *so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life,* (v. 14-15). It had to be that way, so that you who were poisoned by sin will live. 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. Your guilt is no longer your problem. 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

because in Him we live! Rejoice! Amen.

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

PRAYER FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Lord, We praise You for all Your loving kindness. We rejoice that You have rescued us from darkness and eternal death, and blessed us with Your love, light, and life. We thank You that You have not punished us as we deserve, or repaid us for our sins. In Your love You have given Your only Son to carry our sins and to suffer for our transgressions, that we may not perish, but have eternal life. We thank You that through Him we can approach Your throne, confident that there we shall find mercy and help in every need. Give us daily joy in Your free forgiveness for all our sins, and in all the endless blessings of the Gospel.

O Lord, You are mindful of the needs of all people. You give daily bread to both the godly and the ungodly alike. We praise and thank you for supplying all our bodily needs. Enable us to use the lives You give and sustain to show forth Your love and care. Grant us the continuing gift of health, that we may serve You with joy through Him who is the bread of life, even Jesus Christ.

Give us opportunities to proclaim the Gospel of Christ to others who do not know it. Keep Your Church in Jesus Christ in the one true faith. Bless all schools, that all teachers may acknowledge You and serve You, and that all pupils may find in You the treasures of life and truth.

Give wisdom, integrity, and Your direction to all who wield authority, that we may worship and serve You without hindrance, and live in peace and righteousness. Protect us from the influence of wicked people, and preserve us in all dangers.

Give Your strength to all who suffer sickness, pain, disease, or any other trouble of body, mind, or spirit. Enable them to bear their cross with faith in Him who taught us to pray: "Your will be done". In His glorious name, and for His kingdom's sake, we pray these things. Amen.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Numbers 21:4-9

⁴ Then they journeyed from Mount Hor on the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom, but the people grew impatient on the way. ⁵ 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 bread or water, and we detest this wretched food.”

⁶ Then the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people. They bit the people, and many of the people of Israel died. ⁷ Then the people came to Moses, and said: “We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that He may take the snakes away from us!”

So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ The LORD told Moses: “Make a fiery snake and put it on a pole! Anyone who has been bitten should look at it! Then he will live.”

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Ephesians 2:1-10

¹ You also were dead in your trespasses and sins. ² You once led your lives in those sins, following the ways of this present world, and the ruler who governs the air, the spirit who is now working in the people who disobey. ³ All of us also once lived among them in the lusts of our sinful natures, doing what our sinful natures and minds wanted to do. By nature we deserved God’s anger like all the others. ⁴ However, God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love for us, ⁵ also made us, even when we were dead in trespasses, alive with Christ. It is by grace that you have been saved. ⁶ Moreover, in Christ Jesus, God raised us with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms, ⁷ in order to show, in the coming ages, the immeasurable riches of His grace by being kind to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. This is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For He has made us what we are, creating us in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has

prepared in advance, in order that we may live in them.

God.”

John 3:14-21

¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God has not sent His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world may be saved through Him.

¹⁸ The person who believes in Him is not condemned, but the person who does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of God's only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict, that the Light has come into the world, but people have loved darkness rather than the Light, because they have been doing evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wrong hates the Light and does not come to the Light, in order that his deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ However, he who practises the truth comes to the Light, that his deeds may be plainly seen to have been done in