**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**

**Watertown, WI**

**“Jesus Our Antidote to Death”**

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“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.’ 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” (Numb. 21:8-9).

Jesus said, “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).

Our text says the people have set out from Mount Hor and are heading in the direction of the Red Sea. This means they are, in fact, traveling away from the Promised Land. This puts them in a foul mood, and they complain bitterly.

It’s not the first time the people complained. In Exodus 15, the people grumbled about the bitter water of Marah, so the Lord showed Moses how to sweeten it. In Exodus 16, they grumbled about the lack of food, so the Lord gave them manna. In Exodus 17, they grumbled about being thirsty again, so Moses struck the rock at the Lord’s command and water gushed forth. In Numbers 11, the people grumble and weep again. “Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” So the Lord brought them quail, but the birds were accompanied by a plague. In Numbers 14, the people complained again because the spies came back with a report that those living in the Promised Land were giants and we seemed like grasshoppers by comparison. And the people wept all night saying, “Would that we had died in Egypt! Or in the wilderness! Why have you brought us to this land to fall by the sword?” (14:3).

Our text for today is the final complaint of the people, and it’s a sort of nadir moment, the low point, because for the first time, the people “spoke against Moses *and* against God.” It’s the same old tiresome refrain. “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.” They’ve had their fill of the manna. The miracle of the manna had become so dependable, so predictable, reliable, and commonplace that they don’t think of it as a miracle anymore. And notice their sense of entitlement. At first, they were grateful; now they feel they deserve better. “We loathe this worthless food!”

Like many of you, I grew up in a household where ingratitude at the dinner table was high treason and worthy of thoughtful punishment. So, when I hear them say, “We loathe this worthless food,” food direct from God’s own hand, you just know, there’s trouble ahead. Sure enough, here come the snakes.

In the Bible, snakes already have a bad reputation. In Genesis three, the devil took on the form of a serpent that beguiled Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, which leads to the fall of all mankind into sin. In our text, all those slithering serpents are again associated with sin and its consequences. Earlier, the Egyptians were on the receiving end of the plagues. Now, God’s own people are plagued by fiery serpents. That word ‘fiery’ may describe the pain the venom caused. It burned, and many died from it.

Did the people know why the snakes showed up? I think they do. It seems they have a collective “aha moment.” They know it’s their sin that brought on the snakes, their complaints against God, and their anger and ingratitude. Rejection of the Lord leads to death. That’s what sin does to us all. “For the wages of sin is death.”

Even as the fiery venom spreads through their bodies, the Israelites repent and plead with Moses to beg the forgiveness of the Lord on their behalf. The Lord relents and has mercy. He says to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” Their sin, represented by the snake, is now hanging on a pole or tree. The Lord has removed their sin from them and put it up there. The Lord has taken away their sins and put them on the tree instead. As they look at the snake, with faith in the Lord and His promise, the Lord forgives their sin.

It’s an odd antidote, don’t you think? It does not come in pill form or an EpiPen. It comes with a command, an invitation. Just look at the bronze serpent lifted on a poll. Of course, that’s not the way antidotes usually work. You can’t even beat a common cold by looking at something. So, this command is testing the faith of the people. Will they listen? Will they trust? Will they believe? Healing will not magically emanate from that coiled piece of metal. No, it will depend on faith . . . faith in the Lord and in His Word of promise.

Thousands of years later, Jesus would say, “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.” In fact, three times in the Gospel of John Jesus refers to being lifted up in the same way as the serpent. Imagine, that our dear Lord Jesus would compare Himself with a serpent, the symbol of evil and sin! But this is why He came, “to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mt. 20:28). On the cross, “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). It’s your sin hanging there on the tree of the cross, your bitter complaints against God, your ingratitude, your unrighteous anger. As we look upon Jesus on the cross, we are looking at our own sin. Christ has taken the burden of our sin . . . the filth and crud and darkness and death and bore it all Himself on the cross. “Surely, He has borne our grief and carried our sorrows!” (Is. 53:4). That’s your sin hanging there and mine!

Just as the Israelites were saved by looking at the bronze serpent in faith, so we are saved by looking in faith to Jesus and His death for us. “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever *believes* in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

We believe, but we still struggle with sin. We still grow impatient and grumble. We still befriend the darkness of temptation and sin and are beguiled by it. We still try to fix things ourselves, but our antidote to death is God’s forgiveness in Christ.

Just for kicks, I checked out the artwork on this text. In one engraving, the serpents are falling from the sky, being sprinkled on the landscape like salt, slithering here and there on the ground. Already, there are corpses lying around. Serpents are gliding silently in between lifeless limbs. Meanwhile, some of the living are trying for all their worth to deal with the serpents themselves. One muscular guy looks like Zeus on the juice; if anyone can save himself, he can. And in fact, his foot has come down squarely on a serpent, but it’s not close enough to the serpent’s head. It’s in the middle, so the serpent has just enough wiggle room to coil back and strike. In another engraving, a young man has a serpent in his right hand, but again, it’s like a very bad dream where your grip is weak, and in your dreamy state, you are so slow and weak and your efforts are so futile.

In many paintings there’s a t-shaped pole with the bronze serpent silhouetted against the sky. Moses is usually standing near it, pointing to it. He seems to be saying, “Just look here! It’s so simple. Look to this serpent!” And some do. Others, however, are distracted. After all, they just know a bronze serpent isn’t going to help anything, and besides there are all these real ones to contend with. So, a mother is trying to hold her baby above the fray, while she herself is struck. Another woman is grieving over her dead husband, her head buried in his chest, while a serpent coils itself around her calf. The message is those who are too distracted by the living serpents are doomed; only those who trust in the Lord and His promises, however unconventional, they live.

You and I have plenty of serpents slithering around in our homes and offices, our medical records, our DNA. And for all our efforts, we don’t have the strength or agility to contend with them all. We might have half a grip on one, but there are others. Try not to fixate on them. When you do, you become afraid and very sad, and will likely feel defeated because on your own, you are defeated already and have no hope. So don’t look down at all those venomous serpents. Look up. Look to the antidote. Look to Christ and Him crucified for you. Amen.