

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 11, 2018
Numbers 21:4-9
Snackbit but not Left to Die
Rev. George Ferch

Dearly loved by God in Christ,

One of the dangers when in the desert is snakebite. You must be cautious where you step, and particularly where you sit. A classic line from western comedies is one cowboy saying to another, "I'm not going to suck the venom from there!" It doesn't work to suck the venom from snakebite. Only anti-venom will prevent death.

In any case of snakebite, no one would just leave the victim to die. We would do whatever we could for the person, wouldn't we? That is exactly what the LORD God did one day, "along the route to the Red Sea to go around Edom." In a grand preview of Jesus' redeeming work on the pole of the cross, Moses lifted up a bronze snake on a pole in the desert.

Because of God's love for the world in Christ we are **Snake Bit but not Left to Die**. Sin is the venom that is killing us. Jesus' blood is the anti-venom that has saved us.

Why must each of us die? We die because our first parents, Adam and Eve, were snakebit. The serpent did not bite them physically, but spiritually. They lost the holy image of God. Now the venom of sin, missing the mark of God's required perfection, coursed through their veins. That one sin infects us all. We were dead in our trespasses as we heard Paul write to the Ephesians. But the Lord did not leave us to die. He intervened in love as he did that day on the journey to the Promised Land.

God acted in love to save those in Israel. He did not leave them to die in the desert. They deserved to die. Instead of being grateful for water and manna, they complained against the LORD and against Moses. God's judgment came in the form of poisonous snakes in their camp. One of them bit you, you died. There was no escape.

The people came to realize their sin. In godly contrition they cried out to Moses, "We have sinned against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." Moses mediated for the sinners much as a pastor does. With a pastor's heart Moses implored the LORD to be merciful to his people. He cried out for the LORD to deliver the people from death. The LORD heard Moses and provided deliverance. God did not leave his people to die.

The LORD absolved the dying people. He provided the answer to death. God said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." The looking wasn't the antidote. Looking was using the antidote. Those who took God at his Word and obeyed it benefitted from the solution he had lifted up in the desert; the bronze snake.

In our condition of the venom of sin bringing about our spiritual deaths, God comes to us in mercy with the solution. John wrote about that solution in our gospel lesson. The words of John 3:16 are most familiar but the preceding words are important too. "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."

Jesus spoke these words to Nicodemus, the Pharisee who had come to Jesus, with good questions, like, "How can a man be reborn and enter the kingdom of God?" Jesus answer was

by the Spirit who works in the Word. That Word is the Word of God loving the world in such a manner that he did not spare his even own Son. John records the words "the world" more than any other writer in the Bible. The apostle time and again makes sure we know the extent of God's love in Christ.

Those who look to Christ in faith have the benefit of eternal life, of coming into the light out of darkness. We come out of condemnation to salvation. Jesus is the One who destroyed the old serpent, Satan. We have Christ's blood that has saved us.

Sometimes the expression to be snakebit means to suffer often from bad luck, or misfortune. That is not the case here. We are dying as the Israelites because of our disobedience, complaining, and rebellion. We deserve to die.

God has loved us in Christ who shed his holy blood on the cross. Jesus died even though his blood remained holy. He is the light of our salvation who came to call us out of darkness. Whoever lives by that truth, Jesus, told Nicodemus, "comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

What we have done; been saved from death, been born again into new life, looked to Jesus Christ on the cross like the believers in Israel looked at the bronze snake, done the good works God created for us in advance to do, all have been done for us by God. Paul wrote in our second lesson, "Indeed, it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus."

Moses closes his account in Numbers with a strong statement of what happened to those who believed. They were saved. "Then when anyone was bitten by a snake a looked at the bronze snake, he lived." Jesus stated plainly, repeated it in fact, the direct comparison between the snake on the pole and him on the cross, "so that everyone who believe in him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

One cowboy or we may be hesitant to suck the venom from someone a snake has bitten. Most likely it would not do any good. God the Father did not hesitate in his love for the world. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them."[2 Corinthians 5:19]

The LORD God has not left you to die. Look to Jesus Christ lifted high on the cross and live. Amen. <SDG>