

Sermon Draft

Text: Numbers 21:4–9

Sermon: Look to Christ

We continue our journey to Calvary. The Propers for today focus on the totally undeserved love of God in giving salvation to the world by the sacrifice of Christ. The Epistle declares: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God”* (Ephesians 2:8). Finally, few lessons make God’s grace to an undeserving world clearer than our type/antitype Old Testament Reading and Gospel: *“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”* (John 3:14–15).

Luther gives interesting insight upon our text in his sermon on John 3: But now let us meditate on the story. The Lord delivers an excellent sermon to Nicodemus, a Jew, who supposed that keeping the Law of Moses offered him a way to heaven and that his own ascension into heaven depended on his fasting, his praying, and his ascetic life. Now Christ interprets and unravels Moses to him correctly and says to him:

“That will never do it. Your mode of ascension is not the way, but you must be born anew. Therefore, listen to what I tell you. You are a Jew. I shall take your Moses and cite from him passages which you have not understood until now.” Who else would have interpreted Moses in this way before?

He says, “In Numbers 21 you read that the Lord our God sent fiery serpents among the children of Israel when they murmured because the Lord did not do what they wanted Him to do.” In that country, where the heat is so intense, such serpents are called asps. When they bite a man, he swells, turns red, and his whole body becomes so feverish that he is soon past help unless the bitten member is amputated at once. For if such a serpent bites into a finger or a foot, the limb must be amputated immediately. Otherwise the fire or fever will penetrate the whole body and affect all its parts, and death will be inevitable. They are called “fiery serpents” because they inflame the body with their sting so that the affected member must be cut off at once, or death will result.

These serpents were not actually fiery; but when they bit a man, his flesh grew so fiery red and feverish that he died of thirst. For heat induces thirst, and one reads that the angry breath of these serpents is so intensely hot that the very air becomes fiery as though it were aflame. That is why they were called “fiery serpents.”

Serpents have caused great problems for mankind. It was so in the beginning and is now, but it never shall be world without end. For the promise has been given to mankind: “[The Christ] shall bruise [the serpent’s] head, and [the serpent] shall bruise [the Christ’s] heel” (Genesis 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.

We 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”*** (vs. 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 detested the food that God gave them each day. They had rejected the providence of God and his acts of deliverance.

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, righteous God sent forth the serpents to call the people to repentance. And when the Israelites realized that, 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 had turned them back in penitence to the one who was their Deliverer and Provider.

It was not the Lord God'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 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. 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. And 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 serpents, 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, where can we look to be saved?

We suffer like the Israelites in the wilderness. We are struck by sin, death, and Satan. Our afflictions may be the result of our grumbling and complaining, our speaking against the Lord God. Other times, it's the result of our unbelief, our 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 and us turn for aid? What has been set up for us 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”

(John 3:14–15). Jesus identifies himself as the ensign of salvation.

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 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 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” (vs. 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.

Life comes to us 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 us through Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, Holy Word, and Holy Supper, the venom of sin is counteracted, and we are revived.

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

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

The ancient serpent, the one who leads people to eternal death, has been crushed. And we have been provided salvation as we look to him who was lifted up to give us 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”*** (vs. 14–15). It had to be that way, so that we 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 our guilt. Our guilt is no longer our 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. In him we live! Rejoice!

Amen