

Sermon for The Second Sunday in Lent

Date: February 28, 2021

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament: Numbers 21:4-9

Epistle Reading: Ephesians 2:4-10

Gospel Reading: John 3:4-21

Sermon Text: John 3:4-21

Sermon Title: Snakes!?



Introit: Psalm 115:11-13, 18; Antiphon: Psalm 25:6

Hymns:

LSB 566 – By Grace I'm Saved

LSB 425 – When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

LSB 571 – God Loved the World So That He Gave

LSB 837 – Lift High the Cross

Liturgy:

Divine Service IV, p. 203



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Text: Holy Gospel: John 3:14–21

[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.

“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. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God.”

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Pronunciation for difficult words are contained in { }

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Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father, and from our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The story goes: Moses. The wilderness. Ungrateful people. Fiery serpents. Death. Repentance. A bronze serpent on pole. Faith. Life. It's a good story. The thing is it's just not how we would have written it. We would have written something like: The people complained against God and against Moses, so God sent the fiery serpents. The people repented and asked God to take away the serpents. So God did! They all lived happily ever after.

Did you notice? God didn't take the serpents away. People always think that's what should happen because that's the way we would write the story, but that's not what happened. The record we heard tells us that in the trouble and death God provided a way. Just not the way we would provide.

So often, in our culture, we look for the "Easy Button." When something goes wrong just press the button, and all will be well. Wouldn't that be nice? Don't we often look at God like that. As our divine "Easy Button." Going to Him when something goes wrong and expect Him to take it away, so that we can live happily every after. Take it away: like serpents, family troubles, physical problems, sickness and death. Whatever turmoil comes into our lives. Just push the button.

God is not like that. It doesn't say, 'He took the serpents away.' What if He were a god like that? It's hard to imagine what kind of spoiled-brat-children-of-god we would be! God loves us too much for that. Too much to turn Himself into a "genie in a lamp," and too much to turn you into a spoiled brat. So He doesn't promise to take away the serpents. He doesn't promise to take you out of the trouble and turmoil in your life. He does promise to provide a way. Here's a new way to hear John 3:16.

For God so loved His people that He sent them fiery serpents, that whoever would turn to Him should not perish but have life. For God did not send the serpents to His people to condemn His people, but so that His people would be saved through them.

That's just John 3:16 with an Old Testament twist. It's not the way we know it, but it is helpful to think of it that way. It helps us understand God doesn't want you to be happy. He wants you to be saved.

That's a pretty radical thing to say in our world, especially in America, where the pursuit of happiness is not everything, it's the only thing! That word "happiness" in old English has little to do with jolliness or giddiness. It is the word

“happenstance” or opportunity. We’ve really just spun that word to mean something completely different.

Look how we’ve spun it. Look around at what the unbridled pursuit of happiness has done in this country. The picture isn’t pretty, and it’s not what God desires for your life. That’s why He leave serpents here and there in your life. Not to punish you, but to keep you repenting, to keep you turning to Him and relying on Him, to keep you from condemnation and eternal death. Because He loves you. Because He has not promised to take you out of your problems, but to provide a way. A way of life. True life. Not the plastic, artificial, substitute, imitation life of happiness this world offers, but real life. Life eternal.

That is the life He gives through His Son. Fix your eyes on Jesus because to fix your eyes on Jesus is to fix them on Jesus lifted up on the pole of the cross. To fix your eyes on Jesus in repentance and faith, is the way of life in this world of death.

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.¹

We’ve made the mess. Too often we have chosen the wide way of death rather than narrow way of life.² We choose it every time we make our happiness an idol, and like the children of Israel grumble against God. When we grumble saying what He has given is not good enough. When we go running after the pleasures of this world, thinking they will give us what we want. When we become too busy for God, because the pursuits of this world are consuming us. When we use the life and freedom God has given us, in the forgiveness of sins, as an excuse to sin more.³

We like to live a life of faith and freedom to sin, rather than a freedom from sin. That makes us spoiled-brat-children-of-god. It’s in all of us. We like to think we’re snake charmers. We like to think we can handle those serpents. We can see they hurt others, but they won’t hurt me. Hell is full of folks who thought they could charm the serpent. Hey got bit.

Have you been bitten? Fix your eyes the Author and perfecter of our faith.⁴ He is the Life who came into this world of death, to give life to us who were eternal dead to God.

1 John 3:14

2 Matthew 7:13-14

3 Romans 6:1

4 Hebrews 12:2

For God so loved the world,
that he gave his only Son,
that whoever believes in Him
should not perish but have eternal life.

We who have the venom of sin and death coursing through our veins can by faith receive the antivenom, the Blood of Jesus. The Blood shed for your sins along with the washing in the lavish flood of Holy Baptism. The Blood along with the forgiveness spoken over us in Holy Absolution.⁵ The Blood and forgiveness that passes over our lips us in Holy Communion.⁶ The Blood and forgiveness of Jesus that raises us from the death of sin and give us new life.

We live with serpents in our lives. Their bite, our sin, will not kill us or condemn us, and we have no reason to be afraid of them, because we have been set free by the forgiveness of our sins and healed by Jesus' Blood, so we can live and walk in the light of Christ. It is then we are able to do those:

good works that God has prepared for us beforehand, that we should walk in them.⁷

That's another reason why God does not simply take us out of our problems, and take our problems out of us. If God solved everything for us there would be no place for us to do good. There would be no place for us to take care of the Garden, like Adam was told to do. There would be no place for us to give and share the love and forgiveness our Savior has given to us.

Life and freedom from God means that we have freedom from sin, not freedom for sin. In the same way the life and freedom from God means that we have freedom for good works, not freedom from good works. Set free from our sin, set free from our fear, we are free to do good. Not to save ourselves but because we have already been saved.

That is why we do not have to worry about ourselves and we can dedicate our lives, talents, and treasures to care for others. Caring for the garden God has planted around us. Cultivating, training, grooming, and sometimes pruning:

- The garden of our homes, being the father, mother, husband, wife, son, daughter, grandparent, aunt or uncle God would have us be.
- The garden of our job, being the worker, manager, or friend God would have us be.

5 John 20:23

6 John 6:55

7 Ephesians 2:10

- The garden of our world, being the citizen, neighbor, and Christian God would have us be.

In all the gardens around us we should be looking for ways to help others live with the serpents by directing their eyes to the pole, to the cross of Christ. There, in His death, true life is found.

Worldly pursuits, all the gardens of good works, can't give life. Only Jesus gives life. He is the only One who has ever entered this world of serpents, of sin and death, and come out victorious. He is the only One who can set us free from the slavery to sins that hold us captive. He is the only One who can forgive the sins, that can cure the poison, that courses through our veins. He is the only One who can raise us from the eternal death of sin, to life eternal. That is what He has promised to do.

The day will come when He will take us out. Israel did leave the wilderness and enter the promised land. So will we. Easter proves it! Until then, we live the life we have been given in Jesus. Until then, we live in repentance and faith, constantly receiving the forgiveness and life we cannot get on our own.

When the serpents come, and they will always come, we will turn to our Savior in repentance and faith, and rely on Him.

Amen.

Proclaim God's Word,
Encourage one another in faith,
Witness to God's love and
Serve all people

