

*Fourth Sunday of Lent*

*March 31, 2019*

*St. John 3:14-21: **"It's About What God Does ... Lifts"***

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In an article titled "*How Does Snake Venom Work?*" Regina Bailey writes:

There are hundreds of venomous snake species that rely on the venom they produce to debilitate and immobilize their prey. Venom is composed of a combination of proteins, enzymes, and other molecular substances. These toxic substances work to destroy cells, disrupt nerve impulses, or both. Snakes use their venom cautiously, injecting amounts sufficient to disable prey or to defend against predators. Snake venom works by breaking down cells and tissues, which can lead to paralysis, internal bleeding, and death for the snake bite victim. For venom to take effect, it must be injected into tissues or enter the bloodstream.

In our Old Testament lesson for this morning sin and venomous snakes go hand in hand. The bite of venomous snakes and the death that comes with it forms a powerful picture of what sin against God does to us. Sin has been injected into our tissues, it has entered our bloodstream. We read of the Israelites in Numbers 21:5-6, "And 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 food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.' Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died."

The complaining of the people was a turning away from the deliverance that God had given them through the Savior who was to come and perform the exodus on the cross. As they spoke against God and Moses, it was shown to be a paralysis, an internal bleeding, a horrible death - cells destroyed and disrupted nerve impulses - no feeling. When the venomous snakes bit them and they died, it was simply an outward show of what was already the case for them inside - spiritually.

The Israelites had been complaining about the way in which God had designed to take care of them in their wilderness journey. Every day it was manna on the menu, and they couldn't take it anymore. As the venom coursed through their veins, numbing them to the care of God and the hope of entering into the promised land, they became so numb that they preferred Egypt rather than the God who had delivered them from Egypt. The "now" became more important than everything else. This was the perspective of the people: God was failing them in the "now," and so it was time to get rid of God. The people preferred to gain the whole world and forfeit their souls.

The Bible describes the life of the Christian in this world as a wilderness journey. Like the Israelites, we are going through tough times as we wait for the hope in us to be revealed before our very eyes. The Lord has given us his word, water, bread and wine to strengthen and nourish our faith in him so that we do not lose heart. But, all around us is an unbelieving world that offers us all the finer things in life. In this unbelieving world, we are offered a word that speaks of everything now and a food that is a far greater delicacy than such ordinary things as bread and wine. And let's face it, to our sinful flesh, anything is better than what God gives us in worship - in the means of grace.

How often do we complain? How often do we grumble against God on our way to heaven? Doesn't it feel as if we are missing out on all the good stuff that this unbelieving world has to offer? Doesn't it feel as if we have every reason to complain that God just doesn't understand our needs? We are really no better off than the Israelites who felt the strong pull away from God and his provision. Shall we trust God or not? At the crossroads, we are confronted with the desires of our sinful flesh (which lead to death) or the desires of God (which are life).

This lack of trust in God and his goodness, the idea that God is somehow holding out on us, is the essence of what sin is. It goes back a long way, even before the time of the Israelites in the wilderness. Our first parents were absolutely certain that God was holding out on them. "It was just one lousy tree," they must have thought. And the devil took that thought and ran it to death. Funny how condemning we can be of the Israelites and what they did. "If only I had been there..." we like to think, "...I would have been so grateful to live in such a time to have witnessed such miraculous events and do the things that should have been done!" The words of Paul from 1 Corinthians 10:12 are rather appropriate here, "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."

We are told in the Old Testament that the Israelites were failures. Despite everything that God had done for them in the deliverance, and despite the provisions that God had made for the people in their wilderness journey, they kept failing. It points to a reality that we may not really want to hear. Sin is so bad in us that if the Lord doesn't preserve for himself a remnant, no one in the world is going to make it to heaven. The Lord is going to have to do it all. It is expressed in Philippians 1:6 where it says (and I am paraphrasing) "the Lord who has begun this good work in us will have to bring it to completion." And, as he must work in a fallen world, he often must work accordingly by allowing serpents to rebuke us by their bite and venom which helps us to understand the real end of sin. Paul writes, "But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world (1 Cor. 11:32)."

What is the first aid for a snake bite? In the old Western movies, the hero cut an "x" across the punctures and sucked out the venom with his mouth. This is a definite – "don't try this at home" or anywhere! It's a bad idea. In the same way it is a bad idea for us to think that we can do anything when it comes to our personal salvation. Again, the Lord must do it all. In an article titled "*How to Handle a Snake Bite According to Bear Grylls*" we have some good advice when it comes to a real snake bite:

If you're bitten, you need to forget all that stuff you've seen in the movies about sucking out the venom. You'll just open up more capillaries and spread the venom faster, not to mention the risk of getting venom in your mouth. Similarly, don't try to cut the venom out. The best advice I can give you is to wash the wound, keep the bite below the level of your heart, keep your heart rate low (easier said than done) and get as much fluid into your system as possible. Above all, get to the nearest hospital.

It's the last line that is the most telling. There really isn't much that you can do except get to those who can really help. Of course, Bear Grylls isn't talking spiritually here, but I would suggest that there is a spiritual component to all of this. Who is going to really help us when we stumble in our faith, even fall

and get bitten by venomous snakes? The Lord not only knows how to show us that we need help, but he teaches us to go to the only one who can help. Jesus says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners (Mark 2:17)."

As is the case for a snake bite, so it is for us who have been bitten by sin and death. There isn't anything you can do about it except go to the hospital. The only physician that has the skill to heal us is Jesus Christ our Savior. He is both our physician and medicine. As he has been lifted up, he is able to lift us up to salvation. Out of his great love, God has provided a way of escape. Our Old Testament lesson states:

And the people came to Moses and said, "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." So Moses prayed for the people. 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.

And our Gospel lesson chimes in: "And 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 our sickness and dying, we find ourselves complaining against God, often doubting his goodness and persuaded to rebel against him in every way. But God, who is rich in mercy and love has provided the way of escape. Just as that bronze snake, the very sign of the sin and death that was killing the Israelites, became the very means of their healing, so in the same way Christ Jesus took the sin that was killing us - he literally embodied it - and thus became the means of our healing and salvation.

Indeed! Jesus literally embodied sin - became the snake. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree," St. Peter says in his epistle. Paul says it even more bluntly in Corinthians: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus became sin for us. He literally took it all in. And Jesus did this by being "lifted up." And he lifts us to look up to him so that by him we are healed! "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott