

March 14, 2021

Numbers 21:4-9, Jn. 3:14-21.

“Look, Believe, and Live”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Ave.
Decatur, Illinois 62526

Dear Friends in Christ,

When I first read the Old Testament lesson for this morning I recalled a story from some years ago. You've probably heard similar stories. I found it an interesting insight concerning human nature:

A suburban commuter train was crowded on a hot day. The seats were all taken, and many people were standing. At one station a man was carried on. As the passengers made room and gave him a seat, one complained, "We've been standing here for an hour." The man who was carried on looked up at the impatient man and said, "You are very fortunate."

Amazing, don't you think, how easy it is to find something wrong with most everything and everyone around us? Martin Luther observed: "How rich a God our God is! He gives enough, but we don't even notice it. He gives the whole world to Adam, but this was nothing in Adam's eyes; he was concerned about one tree and had to ask why God had forbidden him to eat of it."

This morning's lesson for our journey to eternal life:

LOOK, BELIEVE, AND LIVE

I. The Fiery Serpents.

From mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. 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." (vv.4-6)

Well, everything was wrong. The people were actually criticizing God. Again, "...the people spoke against God and against Moses." The people accuse them of negligence and failure. They we're accusing God and Moses of carelessly putting them in a death situation: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die...?" This is human nature. It "floats" among Christians.

Then there's the implication that things would be better if they were in Egypt! And that's remarkable, because these people were 40 years removed from those who first came out of Egypt. They complained and criticized God and Moses for the same reasons. Matthew Henry said it well: "What will those be pleased with whom manna will not please? (Manna. The bread of angels - bread from heaven!)? Those who are disposed to quarrel will find fault where there is no fault to be found." (Matthew Henry, Matthew Henry's Commentary, Vol. I, Genesis to Deuteronomy, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Mass. 1991, p. 519). They call the food God supplies "worthless".

We're told, "Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died." (v. 6). And that takes us back to . . .

II. The Serpent In The Garden.

The Serpent In The Garden; the first serpent - Satan - and the first bite: “Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field...He said to the woman, ‘Did God actually say...?’” (Gen 3:1). He instills doubt, and then lies because he is the father of lies and his every intention is to murder and drag every person into hell: “‘You will not surely die.’” (Gen. 3:4). And, with that bite, Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and fell into sin, complete spiritual ignorance, dying and death. Welcome to life in the “new” world order!

Indeed, Satan is a fiery serpent. In The Book of Revelation John writes of Satan, “And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon (a serpent), with seven heads and ten horns, and on his head seven diadems.” (Rev. 12:3) He sets himself up as God in order to inflict his poisonous thinking and doing; to light the fiery arrows of suffering, death and hell! . Thus, Paul admonishes us, “...take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one.” (Eph. 6:16).

It all comes together: the fallen condition that immediately led our first parents into being afraid of God and the thinking they could hide from Him. Next, Adam blaming God for putting Eve with him: “‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree and I ate.’” (Gen3:12). Then Eve’s response: “‘The serpent deceived me.’” Both Adam and Eve directly and indirectly blaming God for everything. Both thinking the forbidden fruit would be preferable over unending love and joy! They willingly walked into the “wages of sin is death” and passed their wanting, their blaming, their dying and death to the next generation right down to the generation we find with Moses in our text, down to the generation preaching and listening to this sermon!

All this brings us to these words of our text . . .

III. The Serpent On The Pole.

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 the serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. (vv. 7-9).

We are to understand that looking at the bronze serpent was not some sort of magical act. People looked at the bronze serpent because they believed. Old Testament commentator Walter Roehrs wrote:

Healing did not magically emanate from the coiled piece of metal but depended on an act of faith in the power of God’s Word. Every victim lived if he accepted God’s promise that looking at the bronze serpent would counteract the venomous bite. (**Concordia self-Study Commentary**, CPH, st Louis, 1979, p.114).

IV. The Serpent Finished At the Cross.

And this brings us to these words of Jesus from our Gospel lesson:

“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. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (Jn. 3:14-16).

The Bronze serpent foreshadowed Christ being raised on the Cross. Whoever looks to Him and believes will have eternal life. As John writes, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of his Son cleanses us from all sin.” (I Jn. 1:7).

At the same time, we are to remember that Satan’s attacks on the church, as we see, will intensify. The word’s of Scripture must be taken to heart: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood (though it appears that way on the surface), but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Eph. 6:12). All those terms describe the very forces of hell that stand against us. The forces of hell, led by the chief serpent, Satan, use and motivate the flesh and blood of this world to stand against Christ and His church. They want us to look away from Jesus in unbelief. They do not want to be reminded that this world’s Last Day is set and there will be an accounting, and, as Jesus said, “whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” (Jn. 3:18b).

Just as it was at the time of Moses when the power of the fiery serpents was taken away by people looking at the bronze serpent and believing, so the power of the serpent in the Garden is taken away by our looking to Jesus and believing.

On this day and at this time we take with us this Word of God:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses (the brothers and sisters of the past), let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us (We must endure! God help us to endure!), **looking to Jesus**, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of God. “Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” (Heb. 12:1-3).

Look to Jesus! Believe! And live!

Amen.