

I.N.I.

Twentieth Sunday in Pentecost
October 2, 2016
Numbers 21:5-9

In Christ Jesus, who was lifted up on the cross so that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Two weeks ago we heard of one of the many symbols, pictures and shadows of the coming Savior—the Scapegoat and the events surrounding the Day of Atonement. The shedding of the blood of the bull and the goat and the sprinkling of that blood upon the Mercy Seat in the Holy of Holies was a foreshadowing of the shedding of Christ's blood upon the cross. The Scapegoat being let out into the wilderness with the sins of the people having been confessed on its head was a foreshadowing of Christ removing all of our sins forever.

This morning we have another clear Old Testament symbol that points to Jesus and His sacrifice for us upon the rugged cross—the Bronze Snake.

What would you do if you were out in the woods and you were bitten by a poisonous snake? What if you did not have time or opportunity to get to a doctor or a hospital? The natural reaction would be to cut the wound and either suck out the poison or wash it clean and then seek medical help as soon as you could.

Well in our Bible lesson this morning we see a completely different method, a most unreasonable, humanly ridiculous way to cure a snake bite.

We have been traveling through the Old Testament for the past couple of months now. We have learned about Old Testament history and we have seen over and over again how all of history is His Story—God's Story, it is God's Story of Christ. All of the Bible points to Christ. The Old Testament is not just a bunch of historical stories that are real interesting but don't mean much to us anymore. No, the Old Testament is filled with references, types and pictures of Jesus Christ, our Savior.

The Children of Israel had just about completed their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. In fact they were now making progress toward the land of Canaan. As they traveled east they came to the land of Edom and asked the king if they could cross through his country. We read Numbers 20:17-21:

'PLEASE LET US PASS THROUGH YOUR COUNTRY. WE WILL NOT PASS THROUGH FIELDS OR VINEYARDS, NOR WILL WE DRINK WATER FROM WELLS; WE WILL GO ALONG THE KING'S HIGHWAY; WE WILL NOT TURN ASIDE TO THE RIGHT HAND OR TO THE LEFT UNTIL WE HAVE PASSED THROUGH YOUR TERRITORY.' THEN EDMO SAID TO HIM, "YOU SHALL NOT PASS THROUGH MY LAND, LEST I COME OUT AGAINST YOU WITH THE SWORD." SO THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL SAID TO HIM, "WE WILL GO BY THE HIGHWAY, AND IF I OR MY LIVESTOCK DRINK ANY OF YOUR WATER, THEN I WILL PAY FOR IT; LET ME ONLY PASS THROUGH ON FOOT, NOTHING MORE." THEN HE SAID, "YOU SHALL NOT PASS THROUGH." SO EDMO CAME OUT AGAINST THEM WITH MANY MEN AND WITH A STRONG HAND. THUS EDMO REFUSED TO GIVE ISRAEL PASSAGE THROUGH HIS TERRITORY; SO ISRAEL TURNED AWAY FROM HIM.

With heavy hearts and greatly discouraged spirits the Israelites turned away from Edom and headed south into the hot, dry desert, through a desolate region and came to the area of the Gulf of Akabah. I will give you one guess. What do you think they did? They again complained against Moses and against God.

We heard the same thing a month ago when the children of Israel entered the wilderness 40 years earlier and had no water. They had just been set free from years of slavery in Egypt and had experienced and witnessed the parting of the Red Sea and the destruction of Pharaoh's army. Instead of turning in confident trust to God for help they complained. Our main thought back then was that the nature of people is to complain and doubt—to test God, but the nature of God is miraculous grace—to love mankind.

Well here, in both our first Scripture reading and in our sermon text we see history repeating itself. And the amazing thing is that this was a whole different people. This was near the end of the 40 years of wandering. Most of the people 20 years or older had died off, as God said they would.

Many of these complaining were the sons and daughters of the people who crossed the Red Sea. Many of them had never seen Egypt or could not remember the slavery. What they had witnessed was years of living in the wilderness where God took such good care of them.

But instead of being thankful for all of these undeserved blessings, they despised them. They called this miraculous manna “starvation rations.” And now that they couldn’t go through the land of Edom, the people once again blamed Moses and God. They forgot that when they had a need all they needed to do was ask God. He always provided! They forgot that it was for similar ingratitude and unfaithfulness that their parents and grandparents had died during these 40 years of aimlessly wandering in the wilderness not being given the privilege of entering the Promised Land. They forgot that many of them were still wearing the same clothes and sandals that they had when they left Egypt for God made sure these necessities never wore out.

Their ingratitude showed a serious fall into unbelief and what an awesome lesson the Lord taught this ungrateful people. He reached out and took drastic steps to call them to repentance and to a renewal of their faith in Him and His promises. Suddenly poisonous snakes filled the camp. The Bible calls them “fiery snakes,” perhaps because of the fiery pain the people felt when being bitten.

God is the perfect Father, handing out just enough of the right kind of just punishment and discipline for His spiritually straying children. As the people fell to their deaths, left and right those who saw it, repented of their sins and called out to Moses to pray to the Lord and take away the poisonous snakes. Without the Lord’s intervening hand of help they would all surely die.

The Lord commands Moses to make a fiery serpent out of bronze; an exact replica of the poisonous snakes and put it up on a pole. He then promised that anyone who was bitten and looked at that bronze snake would live!

What! What kind of kooky scheme had Moses come up with this time? That might have been the response by some of the unbelieving people. What sheer nonsense is this? How is that going to help? What can that lifeless, bronze snake do? Nothing!

And that is exactly right! The snake could do nothing, but God could. His remedy called for faith. The power of the cure was not in the bronze snake, but in the words and promise of God. Without that, such a bronze snake on a pole would have been the height of idolatrous foolishness. But the word and promises were there and the cure worked. When the people despaired of themselves to be able to save themselves from the poisonous snake bite, but instead trusted in God’s Word and looked at the bronze snake they lived! Faith is taking God at His Word! It was indeed a matter of life and death. Faith in God’s promise and looking at the bronze snake was the only way to life!

In our Scripture reading from John we see that this history lesson took place for more than one reason. It not only taught the Israelites a very valuable lesson about rebelling and complaining against God; about His justice and His grace; about trusting in Him when He says something; but it also has taught everyone since that time about man’s sinfulness and God’s salvation through Jesus.

Paul tells us in I Cor. that the Israelites tested Christ in the wilderness and were destroyed by serpents. So also every one of us has tested God through our sinful words, thoughts and actions. Even as the Israelites were bitten by fiery snakes which meant certain death; so also we have been bitten by the great Serpent Satan and through our sinful natures have brought forth sin and corruption which means certain death and damnation. **THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH...THE SOUL THAT SINS SHALL DIE...CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT CONTINUE IN ALL THINGS WHICH ARE WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW TO DO THEM...THEREFORE, JUST AS THROUGH ONE MAN SIN ENTERED THE WORLD, AND DEATH THROUGH SIN, AND THUS DEATH SPREAD TO ALL MEN, BECAUSE ALL SINNED...FOR THE WRATH OF GOD IS REVEALED FROM HEAVEN AGAINST ALL UNGODLINESS AND UNRIGHTEOUSNESS OF MEN...**

Thank God that He has given us our bronze serpent on a pole, our Savior lifted up on the cross. Jesus in our second reading draws the similarities between this Old Testament lesson and His being lifted up to die on the cross.

First we see that the people could not save themselves from the snake bites. Try what they may, there was no man-made cure. So also mankind will never find a cure for sin within themselves. There is no natural way to be saved. Try whatever---pray, give offerings, come to church, help your neighbor, love other people, be as good as you can—you will still die and go to hell.

God provided the cure—Look at the bronze snake and you will live! So also God provides our cure from sin and death—**BELIEVE ON THE LORD JESUS CHRIST AND YOU SHALL BE SAVED.”**

Secondly we also see that Moses made only one bronze serpent for all of the people. He did not make 12 of them for each tribe, or many for each household, but one for all. So also there is only one Savior for all of mankind. There are not many saviors’ for many nations and tribes; but one Lord and one Christ. Peter declares: **NOR IS THERE SALVATION IN ANY OTHER, FOR THERE IS NO OTHER NAME UNDER HEAVEN GIVEN AMONG MEN BY WHICH WE MUST BE SAVED.**

Thirdly we see that the bronze snake looked just like the other fiery snakes; an exact replica. But it had no poison and it was not alive. So also God’s Son came in the form of mankind, looked just like one of us sinful people; He took on human flesh and blood; yet was without sin and by His death we too are healed. Paul says of Jesus: **FOR GOD MADE CHRIST WHO KNEW NO SIN TO BE SIN FOR US, THAT WE MIGHT BECOME THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IN HIM.**

Fourthly, as the bronze serpent was lifted up on a pole for all to see so also Christ was lifted up on the cross. Paul tells us: **AND BEING FOUND IN APPEARANCE AS A MAN, HE HUMBLING HIMSELF AND BECAME OBEDIENT TO THE POINT OF DEATH, EVEN THE DEATH OF THE CROSS.**

Finally those who believed God’s promise and looked at the bronze snake on the pole lived. Those who did not believe God’s promise and did not look in faith, died. So also those who believe God’s promise of forgiveness of sins and everlasting life through Jesus alone and look to Christ on the cross will not perish but have everlasting life. But those who do not believe and who do not look to Jesus in faith will be damned. Jesus said it: **HE WHO BELIEVES AND IS BAPTIZED WILL BE SAVED; BUT HE WHO DOES NOT BELIEVE WILL BE CONDEMNED.**

Israel’s deliverance was miraculous, beyond man’s imagination. Who would ever have thought of such a cure? So also our salvation is beyond man’s imagination. Who would ever imagine that God would send and sacrifice His own Son for us sinners? **EYE HAS NOT SEEN, NOR EAR HEARD, NOR HAVE ENTERED INTO THE HEART OF MAN THE THINGS WHICH GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.**

The only remedy for the snake bites was within sight, even of those who died. It was not because of the lack of a cure that the people died, but because of the lack of faith in God’s promise. So also the only remedy for sin; Christ’s perfect life of obedient love and death upon the cross is within sight of every person on this earth—it is seen in every cross, it is seen in His Word. Yes, the remedy for sin is within sight even of those who die eternally. It is not because of the lack of a Savior that people are dying and going to hell, but because of the lack of faith in that Savior.

There is however, one big difference between the bronze snake and Jesus. As we said the bronze snake had no power in itself. It was only a created thing made out of brass. But Christ has the power to save in Himself. John tells us: **HE HIMSELF IS THE PROPITIATION (the Atoning Sacrifice) FOR OUR SINS, AND NOT FOR OURS ONLY BUT ALSO FOR THE WHOLE WORLD... THE BLOOD OF JESUS CHRIST HIS SON CLEANSSES US FROM ALL SIN.**

What an unreasonable, ridiculous way to be saved from a snake bite. You gotta do it yourself. Try it and you’re dead!

What an unreasonable, ridiculous way to be saved from sin. You gotta do it yourself. Live that way and you’re eternally dead!

May this awesome lesson from the past, impress upon each of us the Scriptural truth that only Jesus saves, that Christ on the cross is **THE ONLY CROSS TO LIFE.**

In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o’er the wrecks of time. All the light of sacred story gathers round its head sublime.

When the woes of life o’er take me, hopes deceive and fears annoy, never shall the Cross forsake me; Lo, it glows with peace and joy!

Amen.

