

In our Lesson from Numbers we have an interesting story. The people are griping and moaning about how bad things are in the wilderness. They complain that they were brought out in the wilderness to die. They complain about the water; they complain about the food, and then poisonous serpents appear. If it was about this time of year it would mean the serpents were coming out of hibernation, but the people understood they were a judgment on them for their complaining. The people go to Moses tell him they have sinned and ask him to pray to the LORD to take away the serpents. Moses prays to the LORD. Instead of taking the serpents away (after all the serpents were also God's creatures) the LORD instructs Moses to make replica of a poisonous serpent, mount it on a pole, and instruct the people that if they are bitten they are to look to the serpent on the pole. This is all counterintuitive for us but it probably wasn't for the Israelites.

A serpent on a pole was a symbol of healing in several mid eastern cultures, and today's medicine still uses the symbol of a serpent on a pole. To make a representation of what was afflicting you seems to have been part of the cultural lore and understanding in Bible times. Later in Israel's history we read of a time when the Philistines captured or stole the Ark of the Covenant. Soon they were afflicted with boils. The Philistines decided to rid themselves of this affliction by making golden representations of the boils, putting them on a cart with the Ark then letting untrained oxen pull the cart into the wilderness. The untrained oxen pull the cart straight to the Ark's proper resting place. The Israelites celebrated, and the story ends there and doesn't tell us any more about the Philistines and their boils. Sorry!

In the Gospel Lesson Jesus picks up the story of Moses and the bronze serpent in his night time conversation with Nicodemus. He tells Nicodemus, "And just 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." This is a reference to the cross on which Jesus will die, and he clearly makes it a sign of healing by pairing it with the serpent on the pole. The next line in the story is one of the most quoted verses of the Bible, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." When you stop to think about it, our most common Christian symbol is very counterintuitive. The cross, and especially the crucifix form with the body on it, is a symbol of hatred and death, but for us it is about love and eternal life. Christ on the cross, Christ suffering and dying, shows how much God loves us and gives us who believe eternal life. That's hard to wrap our minds around, isn't it?

Paul has a strong understanding of death meaning life. He writes, "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived ... But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." Paul is very clear that we were part of the culture of death and we clearly deserve death, but through God's mercy and love we are saved. He is also clear about our part in this: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." It is God's action in the cross of Christ that makes us the new people that we are. Paul is also sure that we are a new people. He writes, "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

Now what are we supposed to learn from all of this? What should we remember and how should we respond?

First there is a lesson we often learn and that we always need to learn again. God's ways are not our ways. God's logic is not our logic. God is not limited as we are so God can do what we do not expect. Where we see a problem God sees an opportunity. Where we see

failure God sees new beginnings. Where we see destruction and loss God sees what is really important. Where we see death, God sees life. The bronze serpent does not kill but brings life. Jesus dying on the cross is the victor over this world who brings us new and eternal life.

Second we need to always remember God's purposes are love and mercy. Even if we deserve wrath God does not choose to bring wrath upon us. God always wants good for us. Remembering point one, the good God wants for us may not look like the good we think we want, but if we trust it will be the good we really need.

Third we need to remember that God is a giver and we are receivers. Everything we receive from God is a gift. We do not and cannot earn them. We receive grace, forgiveness, mercy and everlasting life. We also receive a host of other gifts such as our skills and talents, our families and friends and our abilities to have the life situation we have. I thank God every time I look out my window. I didn't create what I see. God did, and it's there as a gift for me to enjoy. I thank God for my wife. Out of all the women in the world she is my gift from God. I thank God for my children. I did participate in their creation, but I did not choose the characteristics they would have. I did not choose their experiences and the way they see the world. They are gifts. I thank God for today. As a cancer survivor I know I might not have been here today, but I am. Each and every day is a gift. God is the greatest giver and we are the most blessed of receivers.

Finally we need to remember that God's purpose for us is to do good. Today is the day we have to be kind to one another. Today is the day we have to cherish our partners, love our children, pet our dogs and cats. Today is the day we have to help other people. Today is the day we have to give to others. Today is the day we have to do the little things that matter. The prophet Micah puts it like this, "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." And there are serpents out there. Some of them even have legs. So if you get bit, look to the cross of Christ. There you will find healing and life.

I speak to you in Jesus' Name. **Amen.**

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

Numbers 21:4-9 (NRSV) From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 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 detest this miserable food." Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

- 1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, * and his mercy endures for ever.
- 2 Let all those whom the LORD has redeemed proclaim * that he redeemed them from the hand of the foe.
- 3 He gathered them out of the lands; * from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.
- 17 Some were fools and took to rebellious ways; * they were afflicted because of their sins.
- 18 They abhorred all manner of food * and drew near to death's door.
- 19 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, * and he delivered them from their distress.
- 20 He sent forth his word and healed them * and saved them from the grave.
- 21 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his mercy * and the wonders he does for his children.
- 22 Let them offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving * and tell of his acts with shouts of joy.

Ephesians 2:1-10 (NRSV) You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved

through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

John 3:14-21 (NRSV) (Jesus said,) "And just 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, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."