

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

Texts: Num 21:4-9; Eph 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

March 14, 2021

## Seeing IS Believing

We all know that there is nothing new under the sun. God is very clear on this, and nobody disputes this. But—wow!—it’s almost scary how much overlap there is between the Old Testament Israelites and us today. *“We have no bread, and we hate the bread we have!”* That right there is a sermon for 21<sup>st</sup> century America! Well... before you get ahead of yourself, ask yourself: Why did God send those fiery serpents? More importantly, did God send those fiery serpents simply to **destroy** the wicked? In a word, no. God sent those fiery serpents in order to wake those foolish sinners up from their sinful stupor. God sent those fiery serpents in order to bring about **repentance**. He didn’t desire their deaths anymore than He desires the death of any man. He desired that all of them would turn and live.

Well... it worked... sort of. Those folks woke up real quick, didn’t they? *“We have sinned! Pray to the Lord, that He would take these serpents away from us!”* Sounds familiar. So Moses prayed. These same sorts of prayers have been offered up with great fervor these past several months. *“Lord, take this from us!”* But what was God’s response to Moses’ prayer? Answer: **Not** what the people expected or wanted. To be sure, God heard their cries and He answered their prayers. He just didn’t do it the way they wanted or expected.

You see, these rubes, in their selfish panic, were looking no further than that one single symptom of sin that was manifesting itself in their daily lives. (And that’s what it was: a single symptom of sin.) They wanted that one symptom to immediately be treated and done away with so they could immediately go back to “normal.” The Good Physician, on the other hand, desired to treat the root cause of the infection that was killing them. He desired to treat the sin, and not just the one single symptom of sin. So... rather than take away all the serpents; rather than take away that one single thing that was causing them fear and sorrow and tribulation (like they wanted, and which is baffling and reveals their true ignorance to the sin all around them all the time), God instead instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and erect that statuary in the midst of the camp for EVERYONE to see. He never promised that you wouldn’t be bitten. Rather, “everyone, when they are bitten, when they look to that bronze serpent, they will live.” And as we’re told, whenever someone was bitten, when they would look to that bronze serpent, they lived.

Now, there are a lot more things that could be said here. We could spend a great deal of time talking about the fact that the serpent statue didn’t have any magical powers in and of itself. When you get down to it, **it was just a plain old bronze statue.** When these people looked to the bronze serpent for life, as they were instructed by God to do, they weren’t looking upon a “thing,” per se, for their

deliverance. They were actually looking in faith upon *the Word and Promise of God* which He Himself attached to that bronze statue of a deadly snake. That “looking” was the action of faith reaching out and holding fast to God’s Word and Promise.

And notice how God does this: He specifically attaches His Word and Promise of life to the foulest, most offensive, most terrifying thing in their lives. He specifically instructed Moses to construct a bronze fiery serpent—*the very personification of pain, suffering, and death*. It would be no different than erecting a bronze statue of a COVID germ today. The last thing I’m sure any of them wanted to look at was another deadly snake towering over them on a pole in their midst. Yet, to that image of pain and death—the image beheld with physical eyes—our Lord attached His promise of life and deliverance—*something only the eyes of faith would recognize and embrace*. The gift of life wasn’t in the bronze or the people; it was in the Word and promise of God. *Sounds a little “sacramentalish,” doesn’t it?* God’s command (“do this”), and God’s promise (“and you will live”) is attached to something real and tangible (the bronze serpent statue).

There is also the fact that *the people’s act of looking didn’t contribute to their salvation*, as if God provided 90% deliverance, but the people had to provide the remaining 10% by their act of looking. That’s not how it worked, and that’s not how it ever works! That’s nothing more than works-righteousness; i.e., God does His part, but I need to do mine too. *No! Life was 100% theirs solely because of God’s gracious Word and promise*. Their act of looking was just a faithful response to that gracious Word and Promise.

**However...they did need to look, didn’t they?** What if, for whatever reason, they *didn’t* look? Like it or not, it was **impossible** for them to say that they loved God and fully believed Him and His Word, but still not look. Actions speak louder than words. “*Lord, I believe, BUT....*” Well... either you believe or you don’t. If you believe, you will trust Him. You will listen and obey... and look right where He tells you look. Either you trust God as your Lord, or you have a different god, who is lording over you and calling the shots. You don’t believe because you see (that’s not faith), but you better believe that the act of seeing is an act of believing; an act of faith! You see/look *because* you believe. Looking/seeing is the fruit of faith. Like it or not, it was utterly **impossible** to have life without humbling yourself and listening to God and holding fast to Him and His Word. It was impossible to have life without fixing your gaze upon the bronze serpent in faith that God would keep His Word and grant you life.

In terms of overlap, do you see your need for repentance here? More to the point, do you see how the actions/fruits of repentance are at work here? It’s one thing to say that we are repentant and love/trust in Jesus. It’s quite another thing,

though, *to actually bear fruits that are in keeping with repentance*. Many will “talk the talk,” but how many actually “walk the walk”? Actions speak louder than words.

This is why I love the fact that the Gospel lesson for today is paired with the bronze serpent account for this particular Sunday in the *penitential Lenten season*. Actions speak louder than words. All too often, we hear the words of John 3:16 and never hear anything else. We never think of John 3:16 in relation to the Lenten season. Folks: Why did God send His only begotten Son into the world? Most people will give you the generic answer, “*Because He loves us.*” You’re right, but *what does that mean?* Look at verses 14 & 15. God loved us so much that He sent His one and only Son to be lifted up on a cross to die for our sins and give us the gift of life. *Jesus tells us exactly what this means!* If He is the greater bronze serpent, lifted up so that all may live, then what does that tell you about your sinful condition? You’re not just battling snakes or COVID germs! What does that tell you about the Good Physician’s diagnosis of your reality? God’s actions bespeak His Word and Promise. God not only tells us that He loves us. He proves it. He shows it.

As I say all the time, repentance, in the original Greek, carries with it a meaning of “180-degree / about face,” of turning back to God from whatever sinful direction you were headed. *You can’t go in two directions at the same time.* Either you are walking in the light of Christ; that is, walking in repentant faith, or you are not. Either you are walking in the light of repentant faith in Christ, or you are walking in darkness. Either those snake-bitten Israelites came to the bronze serpent or they didn’t, and the alternative wasn’t good. “*The Light has come into the world, but people love the darkness rather than the Light because their works are evil. Everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light.*” Jesus doesn’t sugar-coat it, nor does He leave any wiggle-room for “special circumstances.”

I know it’s not too difficult nowadays to see that we’re still being attacked by the deadly serpents of sin, death, and the devil. This is true. There is nothing new under the sun... and that includes the Good Physician’s diagnosis and treatment. Folks: We’re still being called to repentance; that is, to *stop going in our own dark and sinful direction*, telling God how our life’s gonna be, and instead turning back to the Christ and *fixing our faithful gaze upon Jesus*, who came to give us life because we are already dead in our sins. Jesus is the *one and only source* for life and deliverance. All the vaccines and facemasks and hand-sanitizer in the world ain’t gonna save you! The CDC can’t save you! The false god of government cannot and will not save you. All the doctors and nurses in the world cannot deliver you from the bonds of sin. They may be able to treat the current symptom of sin that is assailing you, but they can’t treat the sin. You may be able to hide from COVID or murder hornets or blizzards or empty shelves at

Walmart, but you can't hide from sin. You can't hide from the wage of sin. Those deadly serpents of sin, death, and the devil will find you right where you are, and all the personal protective equipment in the world is unable to save you.

Our Lord's Word and Promise is clear. Jesus is the one and only place we are to look to for life and deliverance; for true peace and assurance. He has been lifted up on that cross for us and for our salvation. And He makes this clear. He bridges the gap and explains the overlap. *"Just as the serpent was lifted up, so too must the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life."* There is nothing new under the sun. This is what it's all about!

Look around. Even if COVID does go away, the deadly serpents of sin, death, and the devil still abound. They're all around you, and they have been ever since the fall into sin, and they will be until Christ returns in all glory and mercifully puts an end to all this. Do not be deceived! You **ALWAYS** need Christ! And that's just it: He has promised to ever and always abide with you, giving you life abundantly in Him through His Word and Sacraments; that is, *through His very Word and promise of life which He attaches to simple words, water, bread and wine.*

Folks: Here is Christ, right where He tells you to seek Him, to hold fast to Him... and live! Now, are these ordinary, unassuming things supernatural in and of themselves? No. Does our faith add the missing portion of life, as if Christ's gift of life in Word and Sacrament are somehow incomplete without our additions—God does His part and now you need to do yours? Nope. Does the rest of the world think we're *foolish or offensive* for believing such things? Absolutely! Many a good Christian wanted to "cancel" these gifts of Christ—basically, cancel Immanuel—because all they saw was a potential super-spreader. But...this is God's eternal Word and promise of life, salvation, and forgiveness—the very Word of God made flesh and hung on a cross to die for the whole world—and the very Word made flesh who *continues* to abide with us this very day for all to look upon with the eyes of faith, here in the midst of death, and *have life*. *May you ever be found to be walking in repentant faith; that is, may you ever listen to, look to, flee to, and hold fast to your Immanuel; your Lord of Life in your very midst.*

AMEN