

Sermon #1,015: Numbers 21:4-9

3-29-13 (Good Friday, the 39th Day in Lent), Bethany-Princeton MN

LIKE THE BRONZE SERPENT, JESUS CRUSHED THE ANCIENT SERPENT

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus Christ, in private You told Nicodemus that You would be lifted up on a tree like the bronze serpent in the Sinai wilderness. We thank You that when the time came You did not let it be done in private or in a corner, but out in the open where everybody could see and nobody could deny it, You were lifted up on the tree of the cross for the sins of the world. We pray that You would help us by Your Holy Spirit, to see the poison of our sins, and then not despair but “come to Your cross, look up, and live!” (ELH #227 v. 9) Amen!

The Text, Numbers 21:4-9. ⁴Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. ⁵And 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 our soul loathes this worthless bread.” ⁶So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. ⁷Therefore 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. ⁸Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.” ⁹So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived. Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word, the word of the cross, is truth. Amen.

In the name of Jesus, Who on the tree of the cross did give salvation to mankind that, from the place where death arose, there Life also might rise again; and that the ancient serpent -- who by a tree once overcame -- might likewise by a tree be overcome (*proper preface for Passiontide*), dear fellow redeemed:

Jesus was not an unwilling victim. His death was not ultimately the fault of wicked Jews and Romans. It may have looked like He was dragged and pushed along to His death, but the truth is that He went to His death. Willingly.

We know this from the words He spoke in public such as “*I lay down My life. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself*” (Jn 10:17-18), and also

what He said to His disciples, such as *“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected and be killed” (Mk 10:22)*, and, on the night He was betrayed, *“The Son of Man indeed goes just as it is written of Him” (Mt 26:23)*.

That brings us to this Old Testament story, because exactly where is it written of Him? In the Old Testament. The clearest Old Testament passages that give direct prophecies about His death are in Isaiah 53 and Psalms 22 and 69. You only have to look at what was said, and you match it up in Christ’s life with what happened to Him, and things that He said or that were said to Him.

But there is another way it is written of Him in the Old Testament: it is not simply said but shown, or more properly speaking, *foreshown* – shown ahead of time. This is what was happening in the Sinai wilderness in Numbers 21.

Once again the Israelites were muttering and complaining. Once again it is about their belly. This time it wasn’t that God was not giving them food, but they were rejecting the manna: **“our soul loathes this worthless bread.”** Again God punished them for their disobedience; He **“sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.”** Then they repented, and asked Moses to pray to God to **“take away the serpents from us.”**

This sounds like just a typical “Moses and the Israelites” story. Murmur, complain, get punished, repent. But this is more than just another episode. It seems as if they are doing something, but really God is doing something.

The Lord intentionally chooses, as their punishment, poisonous snakes. This goes back to the Garden of Eden, to a serpent, a tree, and a poison that entered into the bloodstream -- the poison of sin that each person is born with ever since then -- and also a promise, about *“the One to crush the ancient serpent’s head.”*

But the Lord is not only looking back, He is looking ahead. At the Lord’s command, **“Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole,”** so that the

ones who were bitten, and had poison enter their bloodstream, could look up at the bronze serpent and not perish but live and be restored to life. But He did this not only so that they could live for an “x” number of years longer. He did this so that He could say something about the way He would save for *eternal* life. This is where “it is written” of Jesus, about where He would be going: to the cross.

Jesus Himself declared this, long before He became a target of the elders, chief priests and scribes, when someone who was a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus, came to Jesus in private. In answer to his question Jesus said, ***“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life”*** (Jn 3:14-15). Jesus refers to Moses “lifting up” the serpent on the pole, which in the wilderness was like a tree. Jesus said this in private, but He did it in the open.

Jesus was going just as it was written of Him, by Moses. The ancient civilization of the Phoenicians gradually arrived at crucifixion for sufficiently torturing a criminal, and the Romans prided themselves on using it to maximum effectiveness. But here we see, in the desert land of Sinai, that God was way ahead of them. As Moses lifted up the bronze serpent 1,450 years previously, Jesus said, ***“even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”*** This is precisely what crucifixion was. When they arrived at Golgotha His body was stretched out and His hands nailed to the cross-beam while on the ground, and He was raised and lifted up.

Isn't it breathtaking to see for how long God was preparing this? This act of God in the Old Testament, the bronze serpent, didn't only involve them. He was thinking of you, even then! For the serpent's poison has entered your bloodstream. You were born with it, you were conceived and born sinful. Every day you sin. At the core sin is selfishness. If you take the time to think about it, you can see how this poisons everything and everyone in your life. The poisonous

snakes were just a visible form of the complaints and bitterness toward God that was spewing out of the Israelites' mouths, which started and festered inside them. It was evil and ugly, and the poisonous serpents show what it looks like.

That's how it is for you too. There is this gnawing bitterness, a self-serving nature, that is inside you and poisons everything. Your disappointments turn into a bitterness. You can't take joy in the successes of others. You are jealous of what others have that you don't, even their having loved ones who haven't died yet while you have to endure grief. You get bitter about things you must do for others and not for yourself. This poison spreads to others. It comes out in your refusals to forgive, your judging others and speaking against them, complaining about your life. This is why you say things you wish you didn't, and you don't do the good you want to do. You've been bitten by that serpent of old, the Devil.

This is why Christ was so determined to go to the cross, to fulfill what began in the Sinai wilderness. He became like the bronze snake. He took the poison into Himself. He became Sin – He became your sin -- for you. But although Jesus is compared to the bronze serpent, He isn't "just like" the bronze serpent. He is not made of brass. He is not only God but also a true man: who could be hurt,, wounded, His flesh cut, His skin stretched. His body entered into shock. His hands and feet were pierced. His soul was in sorrow. He felt God forsake Him. This was for you. So He could be the antidote for the poison of your sin.

He would not rest until He was lifted up on the cross. This is for faith. As the Israelites looked up and found life and health being restored, they received faith. So too, as you "look up" to Christ on the cross, that is how you receive faith. It is the only way. In baptism, in His Word, in the Supper, He is "lifted up" on the cross for you to see Him as your only Savior. *"Come to the cross, look up, and live! ... Faith to the cross of Christ doth cling"* (#227:9, 10). Amen!