

“Snakebitten”

Snakes. How's it make you feel when you hear the word? Uneasy? Nervous? Scared. If so, know you're in good company. Snakes are consistently at the top of the list of what American adults fear the most. And even if you're not among the many who are scared of them, finding snakes when you're not expecting them can be pretty frightening, especially when they're poisonous. I will never forget a time a few years ago when I was digging up some bushes in our front yard. It was a nice spring day. I had been working all morning digging up the old boxwoods. Around lunchtime, I finally got the last one out of the ground and sat down on the steps. My wife brought me a sandwich and a cold drink. And just as I was about to take the first bite of that sandwich, I happened to look out at the big pile of dirt that was about four feet in front of me. And what did I see on top? A beautiful but angry Copperhead, who in the course of my digging, could have easily bitten me. A snake who could have easily caused me harm.

This was the case for the Israelites in our reading from Numbers. They had been rescued from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. Life for them there had been horrible, but the Lord rescued them from their enemies. He parted the Red Sea, which allowed them to cross safely. But he didn't just rescue them, he promised to deliver them to a better life in a better Promised Land. And the Israelites obviously sing his praises. But it didn't last. The months of wandering the desert turned into years. And as time went on, the Israelites lost their way. You know, if you're delivered from slavery, and kept with food and water, I would think the usual response would be “thank you Lord.” Thank you for all the things you've given us. Thank you for your protection. Thank that we're not living in fear and being beaten like animals like we were in Egypt. Thank you that we have a future and a promised land. But that wasn't on their minds anymore. They started whining like spoiled little kids. “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to die in this desert? There's no food...except for this worthless food that we can't stand anymore. They grumbled. They complained. They sinned against God.

And what did God do? He sent poisonous snakes among the people. And many of the Israelites were bitten. And many of them died. Of course this only brought the realization to the Israelites that they were once again outside of God's protection because of their ungratefulness. And so they came to Moses and they confessed. "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the snakes." So Moses did just that. He prayed for the people. And the Lord answered. "Make a bronze serpent," he said to Moses "and put it on a pole." And everyone who is bitten, when they see it, shall live" So that's what Moses did and it worked. Whenever someone was bitten by the snakes whose venom was sure to kill, they could look upon this bronze one sitting on a pole and live.

Now, we might think this is a cool Old Testament story. We might think, "good for them. We're glad they had that weird snake on a pole and we're glad many of them didn't die, but lived." But what in the world does this have to do with you and me? What in the world does this strange account in Numbers have to do with our modern lives? Well, as it's been said about some of the strange things we read about in the Bible, "If it's weird, it's important!"

And when it comes to our theme this Lent of Confession, this one is important, trust me. Because while we don't live in a time that God still sends poisonous snakes to bite us every time we complain and grumble against him, we do live in a time when all of us find ourselves "snakebitten." Snakebitten with sin. Snakebitten with guilt. All of those things we've said and done throughout the week. All of those things we've failed to say and do for others throughout the week. All the things we've have looked at. All of the things we've thought. All the selfishness in which we have all engaged day in and day out. Our needs, our satisfaction, Our happiness. All of us are snakebitten.

And just like those Israelites, we can't do anything about it. We can't heal ourselves. We can't take away our guilt. We can't satisfy what God demands of us. So is that it? Are we done? Do we just throw in the towel, because we are bitten and poisoned? No. We follow the lead of the Israelites and we repent. We confess our sins. And most importantly, we believe what God has told us to do.

Look to him, he says. We look to him. Not to a bronze snake fastened to the pole like the Israelites were commanded to do. But to the one who says to you and me today, “This whole snake thing from Numbers 21 is about me.”

You see, Jesus is pretty clear about this in today’s gospel reading from John chapter 3. “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man,” he says. “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.” And this is such good news for confessing sinners. Because when we actually admit our daily affliction. When we actually look outside of ourselves and say to the Lord, “I have this affliction...I have this filth... I have this contamination. As unpleasant and dark as it is for us to think about, we, my friends, have a Savior. And we are called to look to him.

Because as snakebitten as we all are, we look to the one who lifted up on that rugged cross on a hill outside of town. We look to Christ crucified and recognize that only through his work is our sin removed. That only through his wounds, his blood shed, his death, and ultimately his resurrection are we saved.

You know, in light of everything that has happened this week in our world, in our nation, in our state, and in our community—I’m talking about everything connected to the coronavirus including the fact that I’m preaching this sermon in an empty sanctuary on a Friday afternoon with the hopes that you at home will hear a good word from God since services are cancelled this weekend, it dawned on me how opposite things seem to be at the moment. People are panicking and planning. Events are cancelled left and right. Shelves are emptying. But we look outside and things seem pretty normal. And yet we know that they aren’t.

A sinful life can seem pretty normal my friends. Not confessing how bad and wrong that sinful life really is can seem pretty normal. But that kind of normal is not what God had in mind when he loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. His Son, God in the flesh, who became the opposite of what he is so that we might become the opposite of what we are. He takes on everything that is bad

about us and our world, including this uncertainty we are living in today. He takes it all: death, suffering— all the evil. And he transfers to us life.

As you and I are snakebitten by our sin, may we confess and look to Christ. Only in him is there healing, mercy, and life everlasting.

We pray the prayer of confession printed in bulletin.

God is merciful and gracious, granting forgiveness through Jesus Christ to all who confess their sin. As a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sin, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Go in peace. **Amen.**