

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Fourth Sunday In Lent, March 27, 2022

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 285, 171:1, 178, 153, 297.

Lessons: Numbers 21: 4-9, Ephesians 2: 1-10, John 3: 1-21.

Sermon Text: John 3: 14-17

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Our Old Testament lesson today tells us of a time when God's chosen people rebelled against him. This was the nation whom he had rescued out of slavery in Egypt to take them to the land he had promised to give them.

This was an especially grievous rebellion, but not the only time the ones God had especially chosen rebelled against him and his chosen leaders.

But in this particular history lesson, we find a rather unusual picture pointing forward to Jesus Christ.

IN THE HISTORY OF THE BRONZE SNAKE
WE FIND THE PICTURE OF OUR SALVATION

- 1. Sinful rebellion against God led to death,**
- 2. But God provided salvation from death – in a most unusual way.**
- 3. Looking up in faith is what saves!**

From the time that Moses lifted up the bronze serpent or snake on a pole in the wilderness, God's people had a picture of exactly how God would save all people from their sins – and give eternal life to everyone who believes this.

In our Old Testament lesson, God gives a remarkable yet simple picture of what would happen on a hill outside Jerusalem about 1500 years later. In the wilderness, the people were grumbling and complaining against God and against Moses, his servant. We read of how *“the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!’”*

God had provided manna for food. Manna might be compared to a small, sweetish cake, which could be prepared and cooked in many ways. Yet God's chosen people grew tired of it. Does that sound familiar? Have we ever complained about the food that God puts on our plates? Have we ever complained about having the same food to eat for even two days in a row, or complained about eating leftovers? Perhaps that helps explain how the people felt.

Remember, this was a people who saw, every day and every night, a very special revelation of the presence of God in their midst. They had a pillar of cloud showing God's glory by day and a pillar of fire showing God's glory by night.

When you read from the book of Numbers chapter 11 to chapter 21, which contains our Old Testament lesson, you see how God's chosen people complained again and again – and God chastised and punished them again and again.

But this instance was different. God gave them – and all who read and hear Holy Scripture – a remarkably clear picture of how he would show his grace in redeeming all mankind.

You notice that they complained against God and against Moses, the one who was God's spokesman. How often aren't Christians and their leaders rejected when they speak “This is what the Lord says.” Some of us

can remember one prominent occasion about 40 years ago when this happened, before the beginning of our Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship. And we have been told by elders who are no longer with us on earth of the same kind of thing happening about 25 years earlier.

Oh, yes, there may be times when we complain against our religious leaders because they are sinful human beings. But we must be careful that we are not grumbling and complaining against what the Lord says, and thus grumbling against the Lord himself.

The writer of this sermon was called as your pastor to speak what God says in his holy Word. He was called to say “thus saith the Lord” – “this is what the Lord says” and keep his own opinions out of it. The place for opinions – especially if there is no clear Word of God to support them – is not in the pulpit or Bible Class.

They not only spoke against their leader, Moses, but also against God. Yes, the people grumbled against God: ***“they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!’ Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.”*** Numbers 21:5-6 (NIV)

This chastisement – we can even call it punishment – brought people to their senses – at least for a while – and ***“The people came to Moses and said, ‘We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people.”***

Then what did they have to do to be saved from the poisonous snakebites? ***“The LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.’ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.”*** They had to look up at what was on the pole.

How strange! They just had to look? They had to believe God when he told them to look up at the snake on the pole. That took faith. And it was faith in what God said that saved them. They didn’t have to offer sacrifices to be saved from these snakebites. They didn’t have to make promises to do certain things. They didn’t have to torture their bodies. They didn’t have to give or pay something in exchange for being healed. They didn’t have to ‘give up something’ – as some people ‘give up something for Lent’!

These people had been bitten by snakes. What enticed Adam and Eve to sin? In a sense they were bitten by a snake: Listen to what God tells us in Genesis: ***“Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God really say, “You must not eat from any tree in the garden”?’ The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, “You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.”’ ‘You will not surely die,’ the serpent said to the woman. ‘For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.”*** Genesis 3:1-6 (NIV)

That was the first sinning. They were tempted by Satan who had taken the form of a serpent and they sinned. And every human being since then has sinned – we have all been bitten by the fatal snake-bite of Satan and sinned. Not only our original sin, our natural nature, but we also sin daily and much by what we do and what we don’t do. We all deserve to die because of that snake-bite of sin from the devil.

What did it take to be saved from the bite of these deadly snakes in our Old Testament lesson? The people had only to look up in faith at the bronze serpent hanging up on the pole. That’s what God said they should do. Look up and believe that it would save them. What does it take for us to be saved from the deadly bite of sin and the devil? How do we live eternally even though we are sinners?

Here’s the answer: ***“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”***

This is just like the foolishness of looking up at the snake on the pole. It is the foolishness of looking up at the Savior on the cross that saves from eternal death and damnation. To the unbeliever it is foolishness. It’s not really anything anyone did. It is the gift of God that saves in this way.

That’s undeserved. That’s love. That’s undeserved love. That is God’s grace.

In total agreement with the Word of God, we teach that we are saved alone by grace alone, through faith. This grace was dearly bought by Christ, the Son of God and Redeemer of the World. He paid his life to buy this redemption to give it away. This grace is made yours through faith alone by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture teaches that God instituted special means through which he offers us this grace and he gives mankind this grace. Wherever God's means of grace are present, there the Lord himself is present.

So how does God deliver this grace, this undeserved love to mankind? He has ordained the Gospel in his Word and the Gospel in the Sacraments. ***“So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”*** (Romans 10:17 KJV) ***“Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”*** (Romans 10:17 NIV)

And of course, having received this grace of God, and hearing and reading of it daily, we then are God's planting, his trees that bring forth fruits of faith. God's law, his commandments become a joy for the Christian, something the Christian wants to do.

The Gospel is the means God uses to deliver his grace to us. The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are also the means of grace, God's means or methods of delivering his love and eternal grace, his Gospel, to us.

Prayer is not a means of grace. Obeying God's commandments is not a means of grace. Living a good life is not a means of grace. All these are fruits of faith: prayer, obedience, seeking to live a God-pleasing life.

We preach law to show the sinfulness of humans, including ourselves. And we preach Gospel, which is the means of grace. And it is this grace which saves us, through faith.

It took faith to believe that looking up at the snake on the pole would save the people in the wilderness from death by snake-bite.

It takes faith to look up at Jesus on the cross and realize he saved us! Remember that ***“it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”*** Ephesians 2:8-10 (NIV) With the hymn-writer we rejoice:

By grace I'm saved, grace free and boundless;
My soul, believe and doubt it not.
Why stagger at this word of promise?
Hath Scripture ever falsehood taught?
Nay; then this word must true remain;
By grace thou, too, shalt heav'n obtain. Amen.
(The Lutheran Hymnal, 373: 1.)