



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 11, 2018

“Faith That is Counterintuitive”

(Numbers 21:8-9)

Rev. David K. Groth

“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.’ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live” (Numbers 21:8-9).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, your mercies are new every morning; and though we deserve only punishment, You receive us as Your children and provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant that we may heartily acknowledge Your merciful goodness, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

So, the Hebrew people are out there in the wilderness. God has rescued them from Egyptian slavery with a mighty arm. He brought them through the waters; they are God's people now, and they have this history, this covenant. They also have a future: God is leading them into the Promised Land.

It's not all peaches and cream out there. There are problems, lots of problems. The people don't yet know how to live by faith. But they do know how to complain, and that's what's happening now in our text. It says they have set out from Mount Hor and are heading in the direction of the Red Sea. But this means they are, in fact, traveling away from the Promised Land. This makes them impatient, and so they start grumbling again, 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 loath this worthless food" [referring to the manna]. Tertullian wrote, "Although they were there nourished with divine supplies, nevertheless they were more mindful of their belly and their gullet than of God" (ANF 3:679).

Notice how quickly they developed a strong sense of entitlement. At first, they were grateful for the manna. Now they feel they deserve better. "We loathe this worthless food!" they say. This ingratitude peeves the Lord, and he plagues his own people with fiery serpents. Those they bit died. The people get the message and repent of their sin and beg for mercy. The Lord relents and says to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." Of course, that's how it worked

out. If a serpent bit someone, God had the antidote. But it's odd and counter-intuitive. The antidote comes not in the form of a pill you swallow or a liquid medicine you drink or a needle in your vein. It comes with a command, an invitation: just look at the bronze serpent lifted up on a poll.

Now everyone knows that's not the way an antidote usually works. You can't even beat the common cold by looking at something, so this command to look at the bronze serpent is testing the faith of the people. Will they listen? Will they trust? Will they believe?

It's not unlike when God told them to take a choice lamb and sacrifice it and use some hyssop branches to put the blood on the door posts and the lintel of their houses. I'm sure some of them thought, "Why should I? After all, what's the point of that? What if I had other plans for that lamb? What if I wanted to breed it. What if I was saving it up for my daughter's wedding next month. Such silly, useless things Moses tells us to do!"

For healing, look at the bronze serpent. It's not unlike Elisha telling Naaman to wash in the Jordan seven times to cure him of leprosy. Everyone knows washing in a river isn't going to cure leprosy. If their strongest soap doesn't cut it, certainly the muddy waters of the Jordan won't. But Elisha sticks to his guns, so into the river Naaman goes holding on to the promise of God. Out of the river he comes with skin like that of a new born baby.

With all these things the Lord is teaching his people how to live by faith, how to trust in his Word even when it seems counter-intuitive or illogical.

Just for fun I looked around at the classic art to see what the artists have done with this text. In one engraving, the serpents are falling from the sky, being sprinkled on the landscape like salt, slithering here and there on the ground. There are corpses lying around. Serpents are gliding silently in between lifeless limbs. Meanwhile, some of the living are trying for all their worth to deal with the serpents themselves. One muscular guy looks like Zeus on steroids; if anyone can save himself, he can. And in fact, his foot has

come down squarely on a serpent, but it's not close enough to the serpent's head. It's in the middle, so the serpent has just enough wiggle room to coil back and strike.

In another engraving, a young man has a serpent in his right hand, but again, it's like a very bad dream that you've probably had, (I know I have) where your grip is weak and in your dreamy state you are so slow, you just . . . can't . . . quite . . . throw . . . the thing . . . away.

In many of the paintings and engravings, there's a t-shaped pole with the bronze serpent silhouetted against the sky. Moses is usually standing near it, pointing to it. He seems to be saying, "Just look! It's so simple. Look at the serpent!" And some do. But others are distracted. (After all, how can looking at a bronze serpent be of any help?

Besides, I have all these real serpents slithering around.) So, a woman is grieving over her dead husband, her head buried into his chest, while a serpent coils itself around her calf. A mother is trying to hold her baby high above the fray, while she herself is struck. The artists get it: those who are too distracted by the living serpents are doomed; but those who trust in the Lord and his promises, however unconventional or counterintuitive: they live. Healing did not magically emanate from that coiled piece of metal. No. It depended on faith in God's promise. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote, "Whoso had been bitten by the living serpent, and looked to the brazen serpent, might be saved by believing" (NPNF2 7:87). Believing in what? Believing in the creature, the bronze serpent? No! Believing in the Creator and his Word.

That's the way it works with Baptism. Think about it: everyone knows a little water on the head can't save us from death, any more than washing in the Jordan of itself could save Naaman from leprosy. But he that believes and is baptized shall be saved. Same way with the Lord's Supper. Everyone knows bread and wine have no power in and of themselves to forgive sins . . . no more than a bronze snake has the power to radiate healing. The point is, you can trust him even when his promises seem illogical.

There's yet another way to think about this text. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve were beguiled by the serpent in the Garden of Eden. They were, in a way, stung by the serpent, and the serpent's poison ultimately killed them. We too have been bitten by that same serpent and have the venom of sin coursing through our blood. But God in his mercy has provided an antidote. It involves a weak man, bloodied and beaten, hoisted up on a cross. And though, in many ways illogical and unreasonable and counterintuitive, when we look up to Christ crucified in faith, God saves us from eternal death.

That's exactly what Jesus promised in the Gospel lesson! He makes it perfectly clear: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn. 3:14-15). Of course, what this means is ultimate healing today doesn't come from the hospital, or from targeted chemotherapy. It doesn't come with the asparagus diet, or with essential oils. It comes only with Christ.

In my mom's bathroom, the liquid soap next to the sink is also marketed as a type of aromatherapy. This one has written on the bottle "Stress Reliever." As I pumped a couple of squirts into my hands and started washing and smelling and thinking about my lot in life, I thought to myself, "It's going to take a heck of a lot more than this to relieve my stress!" True healing isn't found with new or old interventions. It's found in Jesus Christ crucified.

One last story, and it's quite personal, which I usually try to avoid. After all, the Groth's aren't the only ones in this room dealing with sickness and suffering and the prospects of death. Yet to avoid the topic altogether seems disingenuous and irrelevant particularly with this text speaking to and challenging me all week. Please hear it in that light.

A number of weeks ago, on the recommendation of our oncologist, we were at UW Hospital to see if Gail would qualify for any experimental treatments. A young doctor was asking Gail what her expectations were and just how far

down the experimental road she was willing to travel. After all, there's always something more to try; the medicine cabinet is never really empty. As part of her answer, tucked into the middle of the paragraph, Gail looked at him and said, "I'm not looking for another Savior. I already have one." (I've always admired how she's able to witness to her faith. She's far better at it than me.) In any case, we talked some more, and then, near the end, he said, "Oh, and, by the way, I'm a Christian too." He told us about his church, and the seminarians he prays for every day by name. He's very active in his Catholic church there in Madison. I can't tell you how refreshing it was to hear from a serious scientist who seriously takes the faith. And there's something about how much brighter a person's light shines when it shines in a place where it is not expected, not encouraged, and maybe even not particularly welcomed. But this man let his light shine, and I will never forget him.

Eventually I owned up to being a Lutheran pastor and he said, "Lutheran! Oh, you're so close! So close!" We talked, and he told his favorite Catholic/Lutheran joke, and we laughed heartily down there in the oncology lab and shared a common fellowship that comes not with a tribe or language or socio-economic status; a fellowship that comes only from Christ, being part of the Body of Christ.

Ecclesiastes says, "there is a time for war, and a time for peace" (Eccl. 3:8), and it has come clear that our time for war is likely over. No more going in for the next infusion of chemotherapy, or waiting for the results of the scan, or measuring the success or failure of our days by the millimeters of tumor growth. No more of that. Now is the time for peace. This young doctor let his light shine and encouraged us to rest in the peace that only Jesus can give.

Gail and I are trying to do that. We're trying to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. It's not always easy. I can identify with God's ancient people. Sometimes I still want to take on those serpents myself. And sometimes I get distracted, and I see more of the slithering serpents than the bronze serpent. Looking at them I become afraid and very, very sad, and feel

defeated. But God keeps sending people, people like you, people like that young doctor at UW Hospital . . . God keeps sending his people who remind us to look up. Don't look down at all those venomous serpents. Look to the antidote. Look to Christ and him crucified.

Amen.

