

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“The Bronze Serpent”**

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March 14, 2021

*“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).*

You like snakes? I don’t much care for them either. They’re down there with ticks and tape worms and a few cats that I know. Seems to me none of them can be trusted.

There is an old tale about a peasant who, while out hoeing his field during the early spring thaw, came across a snake. He raised his hoe to kill it, but the snake spoke to him and begged for mercy. “I am too frozen to do you any harm,” it said. “Please help me before I freeze to death.” The peasant took pity on the snake, picked it up, and placed it inside his shirt to warm it. As the warmth of the peasant’s body slowly brought the snake back to life it began to wriggle around. Then suddenly the snake bit the peasant. The peasant reached inside his shirt, grabbed the snake, and threw it to the ground. As the peasant began to die, he asked the snake, “Why did you bite me? I befriended you!” “Do not blame me,” said the snake. “You knew I was a snake when you picked me up!”

It makes me think how Adam and Eve were also beguiled and charmed by the serpent in the garden. They didn’t recognize the evil and were bitten by the snake whose venom kills.

Can you recognize a snake when you see it? Our text says the people have set out from Mount Hor and are heading in the direction of the Red Sea. This means they are, in fact, traveling away from the Promised Land. This makes them angry and impatient. They grumble bitterly against Moses and against God. “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”. They’ve had their fill of the manna. The miracle of the manna had become so dependable, so predictable, reliable, and commonplace that they don’t think of it as a miracle anymore.

And notice their sense of entitlement. At first, they were grateful for the manna; now they feel they deserve better. “We loathe this worthless food!”

Like many of you, I grew up in a household where ingratitude at the dinner table was high treason and worthy of thoughtful punishment. So when I hear the Israelites say of the manna, “We loathe this worthless food” . . . you just know, there’s trouble ahead. Sure enough, here come the snakes. Earlier, the Egyptians were on the receiving end of the plagues. Now, God’s own people are plagued by fiery serpents. That word fiery may describe the pain the venom caused, and many died from it.

Did the people recognize the snakes? Did they know what these snakes represented? Did they have any idea why the snakes showed up? I think they do. It seems they have a collective “aha moment.” They figure it was their sin that brought the snakes, their complaining and anger and ingratitude. Their sin was the poison. Their sin led to death. When they rebelled against God the LORD sent fiery serpents . . . *and they knew why!*

Do you recognize the snakes around you? When we rebel against God and His commands, often we know precisely what we are doing. But sometimes the darkness looks so much more exciting than the light. There must be more to life than the light. Or perhaps we convince ourselves this will just be a brief detour into the darkness, a mere flirtation with sin. "I can handle it. It won't get the best of me." We pick up the snake, hold it close, befriend it . . . and are shocked when we are bitten, hooked, addicted, coerced by its poison.

Can you recognize a snake? You knew it was a snake when you picked it up! You knew it was wrong when you did it. You knew it was sin and rebellion, and yet you did it anyway.

The Israelites died from the venom of the snakes. Their rejection of the LORD led to their death. They befriended the darkness and were overcome by the darkness. That's what sin does to us all. The venom of sin opens the gates of death and even hell and ushers us in. "For the wages of sin is death", temporal, spiritual and eternal.

Even as the fiery venom spreads through their bodies and starts shutting down their vital organs, the Israelites repent and crawl to Moses pleading with him to beg the forgiveness of the LORD on their behalf. And the LORD God relents and has mercy. He says to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." Do the people recognize this snake? I think they do. Their sin, represented by the snake, is now hanging on a pole or tree. The LORD has removed their sin from them and put it up there. As they see the snake, their sin hanging there, the LORD is faithful and just and forgives their sin and cleanses them of all unrighteousness. The LORD has taken away their sin and put on the tree instead.

Do you recognize this snake? Thousands of years later, Jesus would say, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life." Jesus compares Himself with a fiery serpent. Remarkable! But do you see the connection? It's your sin hanging there on the tree of the cross, because "He who knew no sin became sin for us." As we look upon Jesus on the cross, we are looking at our own sin. Christ has taken the burden of our sin, the filth and darkness and death of our sin and bore it on the cross. Surely, He has borne our grief and carried our sorrows! That's your sin hanging there! Believing in Him as our substitute we are saved. Eternal life is ours! Jesus promised: As the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness to give life, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, "that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life."

The Israelites were saved from the fiery serpents. They would still struggle with sin. They would live to grumble and rebel again. They would flirt with the darkness and befriend it and be beguiled by it. But God would also keep having mercy on them. He would pour it out on them and would accompany them through the wilderness into the Promised Land.

As we look upon the cross and recognize the snake of our sin, we see Jesus our Savior. We are saved not by our works, but by his death for us. We still struggle with sin. We still grow impatient and grumble. We still flirt with the darkness and befriend it and are beguiled by it. But God keeps having mercy on us, pouring out his mercy upon us. He will accompany us through this wilderness and into the Promised Land.

So, today ultimate safety doesn't come from Johnson & Johnson or Pfizer or Moderna. Ultimate healing doesn't come from the hospital, or from Remdesivir or convalescent plasma. It comes only with Jesus, lifted up on a tree for us and for our salvation. Amen.