

Written Copy: Numbers 21:5-9 “Keep Looking to Christ”

4th Sunday in Lent

Sunday March 10th, 2024

Text: Numbers 21: 5-9

⁵ And 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 we loathe this worthless food.” ⁶ Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷ And 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. ⁸ 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.” ⁹ 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.

Exegetical Statement

As the LORD leads the 2nd generation of Israelites toward the Promised Land, having shown them His provision in daily manna and miraculous providing of water, they still grumble and speak out sinfully against Moses and God, accusing both of bringing them out there to die. The LORD must act to restore these rebellious people back to a faith relationship with Him. He sends poisonous snakes into their midst and people are dying from their bites. This causes the people to turn back to the LORD in repentance asking Him to remove these snakes. But instead, the LORD answers by having Moses make and post a bronze snake on display up on a pole. He promises that all who look at it, and believe His promise that He will heal them, will be healed. And it is so. Even though the snakes are still around to bite, the LORD heals and saves from death all who believe in His means of salvation.

Focus Statement:

While the God the Father doesn't remove those things we are tempted by, He has provided His means of salvation by lifting up His One and Only Son on the cross in our place. We look to Him in faith and see our sin and God's wrath poured out over it, knowing that because of Jesus' death and resurrection we are saved from the judgement of separation from Him now and forever. Through the free gift of faith that is given to us by the Gospel, whenever we are troubled by our continued sin we look to Christ and know we have forgiveness, salvation and eternal life. Through our continued repentant faith, we witness God's great love, mercy, and kindness to those around us and the world.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

We find ourselves dissatisfied when our wants and desires are not met. We continue to struggle with temptation brought on by the world and the desires of our sinful nature. As we struggle with these things, we may pray that the LORD would remove them. But sometimes He doesn't, even though He has the power to.

What the hearer should do as a result:

When our sinful disobedience troubles us, look to Christ raised up on the cross and alive from the tomb as God's means of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. Know that because He suffered so horribly, we will not suffer forever in eternal hell but live in the bliss of everlasting life. In our works and words share this witness.

Subject Sentence: Look to Christ when sin troubles you and see salvation

Introduction

Did you know there's only 10 more days until Spring? It might not look like it outside now, but earlier this past week it sure felt like it! Remember last Monday? The high temperature reached 71 degrees. I enjoyed working outside working on the porch for a while, getting some sun. But all good things come to an end, and so did our warm weather. Although we are going to have a nice warm-up starting tomorrow.

Spring will soon be here. Gradually the temperatures will warm up. We will have those balmy summer type days. And along with those will come your and my favorite critter: Mosquitos. When it warms up, and especially when we have a good amount of rain, the closer we get to June, the more likely they are to appear. On the back porch of the Parsonage, when the sun is out and it's 80 some degrees they don't seem to bother. But when it's cloudy, or as it cools down in the evening, they come out in force. The more woods you have, the worse they are. My experience is that many of the advertised deterrents are not worth the money. When it's hot and heavy mosquito time they don't care about the Citronella Candles, or the stuff you spray around the yard, or even the bug zapper. What seems to work best is something like Deep Woods Off, and you have to just soak yourself in it. And even then, those pesky mosquitos will be flying around you, looking for a hole in the armor, a place you didn't spray, so they can attack.

Now you can pray that the Lord would take them away. I've tried that. But the answers I got were either a "No", or more than likely a "Not yet", meaning "not until Fall comes". God has His reasons for all the things that happen in our lives that we don't like, including mosquitos.

History of Israel Turning Away From God

In our Old Testament Lesson Israel is dealing with something worse than mosquitos, they are being afflicted by poisonous snakes. They *really* don't like having them in their life. In fact, people are dying from them. But just as with other negative things God has a purpose for them.

To figure that out let's set the stage for this Old Testament Lesson. Israel has been wandering in the wilderness for the past 40 years, ever since the LORD saved them out of slavery in Egypt and brought them to Mt. Sinai where He entered into a Covenant relationship with them, He promised to be their God and they would be His people. He would provide for them if they would worship Him and serve Him alone in obedience. Then they left Mt. Sinai and headed toward the Promised Land. The LORD sends men from each tribe into Canaan ahead of them to scope out the land, and they return impressed by what it has to offer. Yet they are deathly afraid of the people. Even though the LORD has promised to fight for them and give all these people into their hands, except for Caleb and Joshua, all of Israel refuses to go.

The LORD's punishment is that Israel must wander in the wilderness for forty years, until that generation that refused to go into the Promised Land has died off. Those people that are the subject of our Old Testament Lesson are the 2nd generation. And it is once again time for them to head toward the Promised Land. But instead of taking the direct route, they must circle way around to the west to avoid the land of Edom, as the Edomites will not allow them to pass through their kingdom. This detour, as you can well imagine, doesn't sit well with Israel.

The Promised Land is so close, with all its magnificent food and plenty of water. And they are sick and tired of trudging through the Wilderness. They are impatient to finally get there and be done having to eat this Manna, which for forty years has been their main staple. It was heavenly food provided by the LORD for them every morning, all they had to do was go out and gather it up. It tasted sweet, like honey. So it wasn't that they had to force it down because it was vile. They were just tired of it. They were in a funk, tired of everything, discouraged, and angry.

God Sends Snakes Then Provides Salvation

So, when they reached a campsite where there was no water they'd had enough, and they took their anger and frustration out on Moses. Now this was nothing new, their parents had done this numerous times when they camped in places where there was no water. They complained not only about lack of water, but about God's gracious gift of Manna as well, and had been punished severely for it. But this is the 2nd generation, the children that had seen their parents' sinfulness and how God reacted to punish them. This is the generation the LORD is going to give the Promised Land to. And now they have not only turned against God's chosen leader, Moses, they have turned against and away from the LORD Himself who has graciously provided for them all of their life.

The LORD must act fast to bring them back. And He does this by sending poisonous snakes into the camp. The snakes bite the people, and some begin to die. This does the trick. They turn back to the LORD in repentance, confessing that they sinned by rebelling against Moses and the LORD Himself. They pleaded to Moses to intercede in prayer for them, asking the LORD to take the poisonous snakes away.

The LORD responds, but not by chasing away the snakes. The poisonous snakes remain and continue to bite people. What the LORD does is provide the means for any and all who have been bitten to be saved from death and be restored; a very unlikely means at that. The LORD has Moses make a bronze statue of the very thing that is biting and killing the people, a bronze serpent. He puts it up on a pole on display for all to see. The LORD's promise to the people is that any who are bitten, if they look to the snake, and believe God's promise of healing, they will be saved. And those that do are saved from death.

Now why use this as the means for them to be saved? Why not just chase the serpents out of camp so they couldn't bite anyone else? By leaving the snakes, they served the LORD's purpose in forcing the people to continue to turn back to Him. They had to look at what was killing them, the snakes sent because of their sinful disobedience. But even as they saw their sin, they were also beholding their salvation by the promise of the LORD, which they held by His gift of faith. The LORD didn't want just a one-time repentance. He wanted a continual relationship of repentance, where every time the people saw their sin, they would look to and trust in the LORD to save them from being separated from Him now and forever.

Jesus Lifted Up on the Pole

The LORD wants the same thing with us today. You and I are no different than the Israelites. We struggle with similar kinds of sins. We get impatient and dissatisfied with the lot in life that God has given to us. We grow weary with the same aches and pains that trouble us day after day. We struggle with envy and desire over those things we want but the LORD has not given to us. We continue to struggle with the temptations and desires to live like the world does, engage in the sinful selfish lifestyle that the world does. We have those sinful character flaws that we continue to struggle with. In all these things we pray to the LORD and ask Him to take them away, knowing that since He is God Almighty and all powerful, He could do that, Yet He doesn't. Aches and pains remain. Sinful temptation remains. Our sinful character flaws remain. Yet the LORD has not ignored our cries for help, just as He didn't ignore His Old Testament people's cries.

He didn't give us a bronze snake; He gave us something much better, the fulfillment of what that snake stood for: God's gracious means of salvation. Instead of a snake He put His Only Son on the pole that was the cross. He put Him there to suffer and die. He put Him there to take your place and mine, for we are the ones who deserve to be on the cross, suffering for our sins that we commit over and over, day after day. The LORD allows these sinful things to remain in our life because He wants us to keep looking to His Son on the cross for our salvation. He wants us to keep turning from our sin and turning to see Jesus' suffering and dying in our place, to provide us with what we could never earn on our own, forgiveness for our sins, salvation from life lived apart from the LORD now and in torment forever, and instead life lived with Him now and forever in eternal life.

He wants you to look to Jesus and see the depth of love and mercy and kindness He has for you. He wants you to see how badly Jesus had to suffer, and with that see God's wrath over your sin. But then, see the depth of love that is Jesus willingly taking that punishment so you can know by faith you are declared to be not guilty now and on Judgment Day. Even as you continue to sin, He wants you to continue to look to Jesus through the eyes of faith and know each and every sin has been dealt with and forgiven by His suffering and death on the cross. And the proof that is so is the empty tomb. Jesus' resurrection points toward your resurrection and mine on the Last Day. God uses our continued struggle with sin to keep us in a repentant faith relationship with Him now and all the way to eternal life to come. He keeps us always looking in faith toward Him, our Lord and Savior, who is our answer for all life's struggles and problems.

Conclusion

Spring will be upon us in ten days. Then before you know it summer will be here along with mosquitos. We might pray that the LORD take them away, but they serve a purpose in His natural order of things. Mosquitos provide food for birds, bats, turtles, fish, frogs and spiders. Those snakes in the wilderness served God's purpose of turning His disobedient and wayward children back to Him before it was too late by moving them to look in faith to His means of forgiveness and salvation: a bronze serpent on a pole. Our sins and shortcomings serve the same purpose in our life. The Lord uses them to break our hearts and convict us of trying to live apart from Him. His Spirit working through His Word moves us to turn away from ourselves and turn to our Savior whom the Father placed up on the cross to be your means of salvation. The Father wants you to look upon His Son, your Savior, with the eyes of faith. He wants you to see that in His suffering and death full atonement was made for all your sin. And in His resurrection know that on Judgment Day you will be declared not guilty and given the gift Christ won for you: eternal life. As you live out your life of wilderness, wandering in this fallen broken world, keep looking up to Christ crucified and resurrected as God's gift to you. He is the Father's means for you to have life with Him now and eternal life to come. Amen.