

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Quincy, IL
Rev. Martin Eden

Lent 4
Saturday, March 9, 2024, at 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, March 10, 2024, at 9:00 a.m.

“Jesus is the Snake on a Pole”

John 3:14-21

We hear the stories about what the Israelites did in the wilderness, and their actions never cease to amaze us. How could they do these things? They never learned. For 40 years, they continually grumbled against God and against Moses. In our Old Testament reading today, they are on their way to the Promised Land the second time after their 40 years of wandering in the desert – their punishment for refusing to trust God and enter the land the first time. And again they cry out: “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.”

What was the worthless food that they loathed? It was manna. Bread from Heaven. One of the real problems for Moses was that he was leading more than a million people who had nothing to do but to sit around and think.

Manna, their food, showed up on their doorstep every morning. All that they had to do was take two steps outside and pick it up off the ground. When they needed water, God would provide it. For 40 years, God did not allow their

clothes and their sandals to wear out. God gave them everything that they needed – including the fiery serpents.

There are times when we have gotten so comfortable because our Lord has continued to bless us with our daily bread, we are in need of fiery serpents. A week ago, in our Wednesday Bible class, we read a portion of a devotion from Martin Luther where he prays for the strength to recognize and even bless the proverbial “fiery serpents” sent to us which “crucify our will” and turn us toward the will of God.

Luther prays: “Grant us grace to bear willingly all sorts of sickness, poverty, disgrace, suffering, and adversity and to recognize that in this Your divine will is crucifying our will. Help us also to endure injustice gladly and preserve us from taking revenge . . . rather let us rejoice that these things happen to us according to Your will and so let us praise and give thanks to You” (LW 43:33).

And I recognize that there are some people or families who endure many more “fiery serpents” in life than others are made to endure. I don’t have an answer as to why that is. All that we know is what we know. Sin has entered this world. Satan desires unspeakable harm and misery for you each and every day. God had bestowed His Fatherly care and protection on His children, but the wages of sin is death, and the world through Adam has been cursed so that hard labor, thorns, and thistles are the norm.

There is only one solution, one cure, for the fiery serpents in Moses’ day

and the proverbial fiery serpents in our lives – the snake on the pole. “Jesus said: ‘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.’”

Jesus says, “I am the serpent on the pole. Look to Me and live.” Jesus said: “I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

The people in Moses’ day grumbled and said, “we loathe this worthless food.” The bread that is called worthless in the world today is the body of Christ. The unconditional love of God; the forgiveness of sin, the free gift of grace given to us through no work of our own is totally foreign and detestable to this sinful world. It is detestable and loathsome to this sinful world because it requires that we do acknowledge our sin.

Looking in faith to the serpent on the pole so that anyone who was bitten would live required the person who was bitten to acknowledge why there are fiery serpents in the first place. “We have sinned” the people said. Fiery serpents are the result of sin. God and God alone provides rescue and life.

There is no life; there is no forgiveness outside of Christ. Jesus came for one purpose. He came to bring eternal life to the world. “For God so loved the world. . .” And as Paul tells us, this is a gift. We are saved by grace through faith .

. . it is a gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

And this gift of complete and total forgiveness for your sin is yours right now, because you are clothed in the righteousness of Christ right now. Some people think we, as Christians, receive nothing now and everything is about our reward, our inheritance after we die. You have that gift of grace already, right now.

Luther wrote: Even when I feel the gravest sins, I may say: “I still have forgiveness of sin.” Even when my sins oppress me most, when they gnaw, when they haunt and terrify me, I look to Christ, believe in Him with feeble faith, hold to Him, and say: “I am assured, for [You have] said: ‘He who believes in Me shall have eternal life’” (LW 23:75).

This is why we place our confidence in God’s Means of Grace, His Word and Sacraments, and not in our feelings of spirituality. I have been called to faith in the waters of Baptism. I have heard God’s Word of promise proclaimed in my ears. I have partaken of the Bread of Life which is the body of Christ our Lord.

The world around us scoffs at us and says, “We loathe this worthless food.” However, we look to the broken body and shed blood of our Lord as a rich feast in which we have received pardon and peace. We look to the cross just as the Israelites looked to the snake on the pole. We look in faith knowing that our sin has brought about this necessity. The Son of Man must be lifted up, so that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. Amen.