

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 11, 2018
Numbers 21:4-9
Snackbit but not Left to Die
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Dearly loved by God in Christ,

One of the dangers when in the desert is snakebite. You must be cautious where you step, and particularly where you sit. A classic line from western comedies is one cowboy saying to another, "I'm not going to suck the venom from there!" It doesn't work to suck the venom from snakebite. Only anti-venom will prevent death.

In any case of snakebite, no one would just leave the victim to die. We would do whatever we could for the person, wouldn't we? That is exactly what the LORD God did one day, "along the route to the Red Sea to go around Edom." In a grand preview of Jesus' redeeming work on the pole of the cross, Moses lifted up a bronze snake on a pole in the desert.

Because of God's love for the world in Christ we are **Snake Bit but not Left to Die**. Sin is the venom that is killing us. Jesus' blood is the anti-venom that has saved us.

Why must each of us die? We die because our first parents, Adam and Eve, were snakebit. The serpent did not bite them physically, but spiritually. They lost the holy image of God. Now the venom of sin, missing the mark of God's required perfection, coursed through their veins. That one sin infects us all. We were dead in our trespasses as we heard Paul write to the Ephesians. But the Lord did not leave us to die. He intervened in love as he did that day on the journey to the Promised Land.

God acted in love to save those in Israel. He did not leave them to die in the desert. They deserved to die. Instead of being grateful for water and manna, they complained against the LORD and against Moses. God's judgment came in the form of poisonous snakes in their camp. One of them bit you, you died. There was no escape.

The people came to realize their sin. In godly contrition they cried out to Moses, "We have sinned against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." Moses mediated for the sinners much as a pastor does. With a pastor's heart Moses implored the LORD to be merciful to his people. He cried out for the LORD to deliver the people from death. The LORD heard Moses and provided deliverance. God did not leave his people to die.

The LORD absolved the dying people. He provided the answer to death. God said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." The looking wasn't the antidote. Looking was using the antidote. Those who took God at his Word and obeyed it benefitted from the solution he had lifted up in the desert; the bronze snake.

In our condition of the venom of sin bringing about our spiritual deaths, God comes to us in mercy with the solution. John wrote about that solution in our gospel lesson. The words of John 3:16 are most familiar but the preceding words are important too. "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."

Jesus spoke these words to Nicodemus, the Pharisee who had come to Jesus, with good questions, like, "How can a man be reborn and enter the kingdom of God?" Jesus answer was