

ASH WEDNESDAY  
Numbers 21:4-9  
*See Your Salvation Lifted Up*

If anyone truly knew what it was to be without food and water in the wilderness, to be alone, in the shadow of death as even then His cross loomed large, it was God Himself, our Lord Jesus, who was thrust into the wilderness immediately after His Baptism to wrestle with the devil, with the very devil who bewitched the Israelites and still seduces us, the only weapon He had at His disposal the Word of God, His bread and bulwark in His time of testing, not only to set us an example, but more importantly to do as our Substitute what we have not done ourselves.

Yet here we are. *“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.’”*

Death was not what God had brought into the wilderness. Death was what the Israelites had introduced into the exodus, the overflow of their sinful hearts, bronzed in the form of a calf and countless other stiff-necked and knuckle-headed displays of doubt and unbelief. But we can't be too hard on them, because how often, faced with the consequences of our sins, don't we also let out a, “How could God let this happen?” or two, as if God had dug our hole, as if God had said what we'd said or done what we'd done.

They also had plenty to eat. They just didn't like it. They wanted something more. They wanted daily Panera and not just daily bread. They wanted Evian on the rocks and not just water from a rock. God had not left them hungry. They were not without food. No, they were without gratitude. But, once again, no one's throwing stones here at Christ Lutheran. Few of us came with a wallet too full, a family too wonderful, a heart too content. Does anyone else hear hissing?

*“Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.”* Israel wanted more from God and got it. Israel gave the ancient serpent, the old evil foe, their ears so God let that serpent give them his teeth. The LORD sent snakes, the very symbol of disobedience, to give the Israelites what unbelief promises: death.

But St. Paul's words ring true, *“Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.”* Israel wanted to live, wanted salvation. Israel came running back to the same LORD and the same Moses against whom they had grumbled, and they didn't hide their sin, didn't sugarcoat it, but confessed it, plainly and simply. *“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.”*

And what did the LORD do? He showed mercy. And what did Moses do? He prayed for them. Why? Because that's what the LORD does for His people, and that's what a pastor does for His people, because God's kingdom is a kingdom of grace, of undeserved love, of mercy and medicine.

*“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.’”*

And what did the smart Israelites do? They did exactly what the LORD said would heal them. They looked at the snake on the pole. They didn't tell God to explain it. They didn't try to come up with a better plan. They didn't invent a special prayer or a patron saint. They didn't offer to make a deal with God. They didn't try to look inside, to dress the snake up a bit, to wait for someone arguing them into looking. They didn't do any of that nonsense. They looked at the snake. Why? They were desperate. They wanted to be healed, to live. They wanted God to kill the venom before the venom killed them.

And I can guarantee you that if they came upon another in need of healing, they didn't beat around the bush or banter on about inanities. They held that snake on a pole in front of their eyes and said, ["This is what saved me. This is all that can save you."](#)

You've been bitten. The serpent has his teeth in you. Look at your life. The evidence doesn't require a black light or magnifying glass. Unless you've numbed your conscience into a vegetative state, you can feel the guilt of your sin burning when you examine yourself. You've grumbled. You've complained. You've taken what God's given for granted. You've spoken to and treated your spouse, your parents, your children, your fellow believers as something less than gifts of God. You've become bored with the Sacrament and half-heartedly heard the Scriptures as though they were less than the only medicine for your most fatal disease. You've sung the wonderful words—yes, the poetry of your salvation—set before you in the hymns of the church thoughtlessly and without awe. You've been irritated when your daily bread wasn't Panera, when your water wasn't Evian on the rocks. You've been bitten. How do I know? Because all of us have been bitten. All of us bear those tell-tale teeth marks with no one to blame but ourselves.

So what do we do? We look at the snake. We look at the ancient's serpent's crushed head and follow it to the bruised heel, to the pierced foot, to the outstretched arms, to the sacred head now wounded, crowned with Adam's thorns. We look at the Savior, who promised already in chapter three of St. John's Gospel, *"And 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."*

Here is the medicine. Here is what kills the venom before the venom kills you. Here, lifted up on the pole of the cross for all to see, His Blood, like penicillin, poured into a cup for you to drink of His death to receive His life, His Body, bread from heaven, offered as the food you need—even when you don't want it as much as you need it—to sustain you on your way to the Promised Land of heaven.

There's no use telling God to explain it, coming up with a better plan, inventing a special prayer or a patron saint, offering to make a deal with God, no use trying to look inside, dressing the snake up a bit, waiting for someone argue you into looking. Enough of that nonsense. Look at the Savior. You want to be healed, don't you? You want to live. Be still and know that He is God, God for you, God lifted up as your stairway to heaven.

And when you come upon another in need of healing, don't beat around the bush or banter on about inanities. Hold that crucifix, that Savior lifted up on a tree, in front of their eyes and say, ["This is what saved me. This is all that can save you."](#)

We set our eyes on the cross this Lenten season, and in the cross we see it all. As I hold it before your eyes I rightly accuse, “Do you see what you have done to Him,” but that’s not all, and it’s all for naught if not followed by, “But do you see what He has done for you.”

The snakes are loose. You know that. I know that. They’re everywhere: on TV, the radio, the internet, in the home, the workplace, the church, worst of all, in our own very hearts. Their bite stings and burns. Their venom works death. But take heart. Jesus is here. Look at Him, on the altar, in the font, stuffed into your ears. He has come to crush the serpent’s head. He is the medicine their venom cannot withstand. He will be lifted up soon, and when He is, see what you have done to Him, but, even more, see what He has done for you, and let the hymn verse be your humble prayer, for the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective:

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;  
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.  
Heav’n morning breaks, and earth’s vain shadows flee;  
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me! (CW 588, v. 7). Amen.