***Numbers 21:4-9***

*4From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 5The 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 detest this miserable food.” 6Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. 8And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” 9So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.*

The Gospel reading for today contains perhaps the best known and most often quoted verse in the Bible, John 3:16 “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*” What is far less know, and never quoted, are two verses prior to John 3:16. There Jesus says, “*just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”* This morning I want to look back into that story that Jesus refers to in the book of Numbers which also happens to be the first lesson that was read today.

A few years ago I was discussing this story with youth during a confirmation class when one of the kids blurted out, “That story is stupid!” And you know…I have to admit, he had a point. The story about snakes biting people and the remedy God comes up with flies in the face of both our theological sensibilities and our scientific good sense. How can it be that God sends poisonous snakes not just to punish people, but to kill people, just because he’s tired of hearing them complain? And then there’s that other thing, who can believe that looking at a bronze statue of a snake on a pole is going to cure someone who has just received a poisonous snake bite?

If I were one of those who were bitten my first thought wouldn’t be to stare at a statue of a snake on a pole. I’d be looking for real stuff like the anti-venom and a bandaid. But oh yeah, those things hadn’t been invented yet. Those concerns aside, perhaps the most important question this story raises is “Where is the God with whom we can feel safe and is comfortable to be around?”

Clearly this story causes us to see a very different side of God. The Hebrews who wandered through the wilderness didn’t experience God as a safe and comfortable companion. In the great showdown with Pharaoh, God sends not poisonous snakes but ten vicious plagues to show the superiority of the God of Israel over Egypt’s gods. That story ends with to first born, both human and animal, being put to death. God, led his people out of Egypt in the form of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, a sight that incited panic among the Egyptians (Exodus 13:21, 14:24). Then at Mount Sinai, God thunders on the mountain in fire and smoke, terrifying the Israelites (Exodus 19:18, 20:18-1). These are not the images that invite us to snuggle up into God’s everlasting arms, “safe and secure from all alarms,” as the old hymn goes.

Yet, despite all of these great and frightening displays of God’s power, the Israelites lacked the confidence that this almighty God will, in fact, deliver them into the Promised Land. Once delivered safely out of the clutches of slavery, by the parting of the Red Sea no less, it only takes the Israelites three more verses in Exodus 15 to move them from their songs of praise to their first grumbling, convinced that God has abandoned them in the desert.

In this week’s text we hear the people complain, “*Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?”* But they don’t stop there their griping continues with, *“For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food, this Mana you have provided for us*”. In other words, we don’t have any food, and it tastes awful! It reminds me of a line from *Huckleberry Finn*, when Huck tries to speak well of a preacher by telling his friend, “he never charged nothing for his preaching, and it was worth it, too.”

In today’s text the complaints are immediately followed by the statement, “*Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died*” (v. 6). Now, neither the narrator nor God ever explicitly says that God sent the snakes because the people complained. That causality does seem to be implied, especially because the people themselves say that their “*speaking against*” God and Moses is the reason they are suffering (v. 7). The narrative specifies that God sends the snakes, but neither God or the narrator say the snakes are there as a form of punishment; it is the people themselves who draw **that** conclusion.

Maybe God did not send the snakes because of their quarreling after all. Crying out to God, complaining to God is normally not condemned in Scripture; there is a whole lot of psalms that centers on complaints or a lament! Of course, there are times in Scripture when “speaking against” God or God’s messenger does bring catastrophe — as Israel’s treatment of God’s prophets clearly demonstrate. Even so, in this week’s reading, we, like the Israelites themselves, are left to draw our own conclusions. Is God punishing the people with the snakes? If so, we reason, then surely the people deserved it! But if not then we are left with the thought that God’s ways are unpredictable, and his ways are much less safe than we ever could have imagined.

The snakes cause the people to reflect upon their sin and when they do they ask Moses to pray for God to take the snakes away. Moses does just that, he prays…but God **does not** give Moses or the people what they ask for. The serpents don’t go away, nor do they stop biting. Instead, God instructs Moses on how to heal the people when they are bitten. Keep in mind…the snakes are still there, they are still biting, but those who are bitten now have a chance to live! But their deliverance does not come in the form they desired or in the way that they expect.

This story takes us 21st-century Christians way out of our comfort zone. We don’t normally think of God as a dangerous, unpredictable presence in our lives. Perhaps we need to think again. If we are comfortable thinking we’ve got God all figured out, that he’d is like a warm blanket or a cuddly stuffed animal…then we have ignored the mystery and divine freedom with which God is characterized throughout much of Scripture. A gentile, predictable, rational, and reasonable God does not pull people out of slavery, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land; no, that takes a God who is anything but reasonable and predictable. We need—and we have—a God who we need to watch out for because he’s “on the loose!”

It’s interesting that Moses’ serpent-on-a-pole shows up once more in the Old Testament, in 2 Kings chapter 18. There King Hezekiah, hundreds of years later, makes it a point to break the sacred pole and he breaks into pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made. Why? Because people were treating it as an idol and making offerings to it. Over time the Israelites refashioned God in their own image. Being “God’s chosen people” they considered God as only their protector and had grown comfortable in their sinful ways. They had forgotten the living, free, and dangerous God who saved his people from poisonous snakes and focused their attention instead on a bronzed, domesticated, manufactured idol that they could see and understand...an idol that was not a threat to their lifestyle or the way they mistreated others.

Perhaps the student in my Sunday School class so long ago was wrong. After all, he was only 13 years old. Perhaps this story isn’t stupid but profound in the sense that it calls to question our desire and obsession for a warm and comfortable relationship with God. What if God is calling us, inspiring us, to break up **our** bronzed serpents and to turn our attention instead to the God of the wilderness: dangerous, maybe, and unpredictable for sure, but one who is always present with us. If we look closer at this story we encounter a God who is listening to his people, having mercy upon them, and devises a way for them to cope with their frightening and unfortunate situation.

We are separated from **their** situation by more then 3,000 years but we are united with them in one way…we have the same God and the same basic problem, sin...that awful poisonous snake that won’t leave us alone! Throughout **our** lives we, like the ancient Hebrews, find ourselves in some awful situations. Perhaps its a serious life-threatening illness, bad relationships that are only getting worse, or a job you hate but can’t afford to leave. And we, like them, want it all to just go away and disappear.

Well guess what? We don’t get our wish. We live in a very snaky world. Our sin, our poisonous snakes, don’t just disappear and they keep biting. So where do we turn. Where do we look for relief?

In today’s Gospel Jesus is talking with Nicodemus and he says, “*Just 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. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*”

The antidote to our poison snakes, the antidote to our sin, is Jesus himself. He is the one who is lifted up, not on a pole, but on a cross. We all have been bitten by sin and when we turn to him we live. We can’t ignore the biting serpents or pretend they’re not real. We aren’t naive about life or the venoms of this world. Yet, to the degree we give our attention to the biting serpents and the venoms of this world, we become toxic to ourselves and one another. God’s desire for us to be fully alive, hopeful, and whole. When we turn our attention to the cross, to the lifted up Son of Man, we become life and light to ourselves and for one another.

God loves us enough not only to forgive us, but to provide an antidote for the lethal poison called sin. Whatever the snaky places of your life are today, the gospel promises there is an antidote to the venom, a healing for every bite, a life for every death. There is hope in the midst of despair, forgiveness in the midst of sin, reconciliation in the midst of brokenness, strength in the midst of weakness, light in the midst of darkness.

If you’ve been bit by a snake, the last thing you want to see is another snake. In the midst of our suffering and turmoil the last thing we want to see is someone else who is suffering. But that is our hope and the key to our salvation. When we look upon the cross, we see a suffering Jesus, we see our own sin. We also see the One who washes it away and gives life. It is our God, the same God who guided the Israelites to the promised land, who will pull us through our present situation. Stop complaining, look to the cross, hold fast for just a little while longer. God is listening he hears our prayers. Our God is all powerful and unpredictable. God is also faithful, present with us in these troubled times, and most importantly—God will provide! When we come to receive Holy Communion we are eating and drinking his body and blood. We are receiving a precious antidote for our sin. The body of Christ, given for you on the cross. The blood of Christ, shed for you on the cross. The Holy Cross is your life and your salvation. Turn to him and live. Amen.