

Shepherd of the Mountains

Lutheran Church (LC-MS)

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The Fourth Sunday in Lent

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“Poisoned People”

Text: John 3:14-15

“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.”

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:2).

My dad would have loved this sermon. He loved snakes. Loved them! Snakes were to him like *peppers* used to be to Leroy; he never met a snake he didn't like. It was the same for Leroy with bottles of hot sauce and peppers.

Do you know your peppers - your *hot* peppers? On a scale developed by American pharmacist Wilbur Scoville back in 1912, they get rated for their [kap-SEY-uh-sin] capsaicin concentration.

Down on the bottom you've got your bell peppers, and - no bell-y achin'! - on the Scoville scale, green and red and yellow and orange bell peppers tip the scale at anywhere between zero - yes, *zero!* - and 100. Banana peppers can be ten times hotter, up to 1000 Scoville heat units. Cayenne pepper is 10-100 times *that*. Habaneros heat it up from there at a base of 10,000 units up to 350,000 shu's. But if you really want pepper pain, you've got to jump to the little red that

pepper people the world over acknowledge to be the hottest little pepper on the planet: the Carolina Reaper, peppering it up at up to 3.2 *million* Scoville heat units.

Now if snakes were peppers, and venom was measured in Scovilles, the cobra might be Cayenne, the Malayan pit viper a habanero, and the inland [TAHY-pan] taipan could well be the Carolina Reaper. I guarantee my dad would have liked all *three*.

If you like *your* snakes “*hot*,” these three are *plenty* hot!

Cobra venom immediately goes to work bringing about respiratory failure, which leads to death.

The pit viper's venom destroys every cell it comes in contact with – whether blood, muscle, ligament, or even bone. Most people don't die from the bite of the Malayan pit viper - as long as they get right to the *hospital!* They might just lose part of a finger or some tissue from the area where the bite occurred.

But there's no such guarantee with the venom of the inland taipan. No amount of milk or tomato juice is able to put *that* fire out. One drop is said to contain enough poison to wipe out the entire rat population of a small city, or kill as many as a hundred healthy men.

So, stay clear, right - of all three, even if, like my dad, you *like* snakes?

Except, . . . the venom of the *pit viper* seems to have potential for helping stroke victims. Except that *cobra* venom is being used in researching cures for both Parkinson's Disease and Alzheimer's. Except that the protein in the *inland taipan* has been found to be useful in stopping excessive bleeding during surgery.

The venom of sin, on the other hand, contains no medicinal benefit. No benefit at all.

And don't we know - in the theme of our meditation this morning - poisoned people? Don't we know, those who have been well, let's just go ahead and say it, snakebit?

Snakebitten, if you really want to insist on the grammar; however if you ask me, snakebit makes the point a little bit better. We've got a long history of being snakebit, don't we, *Israel*? We've got a long history of being "poisoned people."

Turn the clock back thirty-four hundred years, back to 1400 B.C. God's first Israel was on its way to the Promised Land.

Oh, but tell us something we *don't* know, right, Israel? *Had* been for nearly forty years. *Had* been *wandering* - all too often, it seemed, *aimlessly* - in the *wilderness*, all the while they were *supposedly* heading for the land flowing with milk and honey.

There certainly was no milk and honey in the *wilderness*, was there? There was . . . only what the Lord provided. There was . . . only manna. Monday? Manna. Tuesday? Manna. *Every* day? Manna.

Sick and tired of manna. Sick and tired of the wilderness. Sick and tired of just wandering - just like their parents before them. Only, nearly forty years in, nearly forty years since they had left Egypt through the miraculously dry middle of the Red Sea with a wall of water on their left and another on their right, that first generation of those who were the first to be hauled off into bondage had died off. Their failure to trust in Yahweh had resulted in Him denying them from entering the Promised Land. So now it was their children - and only a handful of the original, only the few who had stayed faithful - that remained.

They were ready. They were *ever* so ready! They were ready to make the border crossing. They were ready to enter the Promised Land. And they were *this* (holding up thumb and forefinger spaced ever-so-slightly apart) close! But then the King of Edom said, "No." But then the leader of all those who had descended not from Jacob but from Esau said, "Go around."

The people didn't take it well. They "*became impa-*

tient on the way." So near, and yet still so painfully far.

It wasn't going to be a short detour. Of all the *luck*, right? Talk about being snakebit! Talk about being just plain *unlucky*!

"*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.'*"

"Our 'appetite,'" they mumbled, "hates this detestable bread!"

So basically they had two complaints. One, that God had delivered them. And, two, how God was providing for them.

Now it was the Lord their God who didn't take it well.

"*Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.*"

"*Fiery serpents.*" Would it surprise you to know that you know the Hebrew word here? That it's a familiar one? Seraphim - or sare-uff-EEM, as it sounds in Hebrew, where (eem) "im" is the plural.

Yes, just like the *angels*. The angels from *Isaiah*, the ones that were flying around the throne of God when Isaiah first received his call from God. Seraphim - "fiery, burning ones." Remember how one of them placed a burning coal against Isaiah's lips while voicing those words, "*See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for*" (Is. 6:7)?

Only now the fire was not in the angels, or even in the coals, but rather in the serpents. These were fiery *serpents*.

I wonder if Martin Luther didn't love snakes, too. He sure seemed to know more about them than *I* do - and *I* have Al Gore's Internet. Al Gore - who now famously, if foolishly, made the claim on CNN's "Late Edition" way back on March 9, 1999, "During my service in the United States Congress, I took the initiative in creating the Internet."

He, too, often of the fiery tongue, monk Martin Luther, said, not to Wolf Blitzer on American television, but rather to his own little congregation of German people in a sermon on this morning's Gospel lesson,

They are called "fiery serpents" because they inflame the body with their sting, so that the affected member must be cut off at once, or death will result. . . . If such a serpent bites into a finger or a foot, the limb must be amputated immediately. Otherwise the fire or fever will penetrate the whole body and affect all its parts, and death will be inevitable. These serpents are not actually fiery; but when they bit a man, his flesh grew so fiery red and feverish that he died of thirst" (AE 22:337-339).

Our ancestors, the Israelites, got the message pretty quickly. And why *wouldn't* they, for this wasn't like one of those ten *plagues*, where the snakes slithered in in one venomous wave and then were gone again. The Hebrew tense (Piel) makes it clear the biting was on-going:

6 *Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they [repeatedly (the verb says)] bit the people.*

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."*

That's the sound of *repentance*, isn't it? So Moses passed the poisoned people's change of heart on to God:

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."*

Well, now if we didn't know what we know about some of the salutary properties of snake venom, that would seem to be just about the most foolish thing ever - poisoned people being purified by a poison-bearing body or being?

And yet, it was wildly successful:

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.*

"*Anyone.*"

Anyone who would *look* at it, that is! For God's cure here didn't work *automatically*. It didn't work "like magic," as we often hear said. His remedy only benefitted those who confessed their sin and demonstrated their trust in His promise by taking Him at His word - only those who did what He instructed, and looked up to the bronze snake. As foolish as that might seem.

Children of Abraham, brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, Abraham's Promised Son, tell me if the Christian life thirty four hundred years later doesn't have a lot in common with ancient Israel's time in the wilderness. For, just like those Israelites, you and I have been delivered. Just like those Israelites, we have been redeemed. For *them*, the final act of deliverance was the blood of the Passover lamb splashed onto the doorposts and lintels of their Egyptian homes. For *us*, it was the blood of "*the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world*" (Jn. 1:29) splashed onto the doorposts and lintels, if you will, of that terrible cross at Golgotha, at Calvary. As foolish as that might seem.

However, our being freed from our bondage there didn't mean that life was all "peaches and cream," all "hearts and flowers," from there, did it, fellow poisoned people - those who not only have been snakebit since birth, snakebit through no fault of our own, but as a result of the bite inflicted on our first parents, Adam and Eve, but also snakebit again and again and again along the way wholly by our own doing, by our own refusal to trust in our God and Deliverer? And, directly as a result, has *our* life at times not been a frustrating and seemingly never-ending struggle, a difficult journey, a hard road?

So, what do we do at those times, fellow Israelites, God's *new* Israel - not by *birth* but, as Jesus answered Nicodemus in the context of our Gospel lesson this morning, by *re-birth*; not by *flesh*, as Saul-turned-Paul clarified with the new Christians at Rome, but by *faith*, "*For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.'* This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring" (Rom. 8:6b-8).

We look in faith - we look *with* faith - to the "*Son of Man*" "*lifted up*" on the cross. We remember that God gave us Jesus, who was lifted up - who was skewered and impaled there - "*not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him*" (John 3:17). We look on the one there truly snakebit - struck by the venomous snake Satan, just as God our Father warned us all way back in Genesis, right after the ancient serpent had so deceived both Adam and Eve.

"*You shall bruise His heel,*" He assured the serpent there. And on that cross, Satan did indeed "bruise the heel" of God's One-and-only Son.

"But *He shall bruise your head,*" the Lord God at the same time promised all "Israel," all who would believe. And on that cross, Jesus did indeed crush sin, and death, and the devil himself underfoot, once and for all, "*It is finished*" (John 19:30).

Satan is finished. *Salvation* is finished; it is won. By God's grace, we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8). We "*believe in Him*" and - despite our death - we live, we "*have eternal life*" (John 3:14). As foolish as that might seem, as we heard just last week:

"*For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and*

folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:22).

Jews demand signs. Nicodemus - as a good Jew - came to Jesus because of the signs.

"*This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him'*" (Jn. 3:2).

Christ crucified and risen from the dead is the greatest sign of all. May we again this day - and every day here in our 40-year journey through the wilderness - see this greatest of Jesus' signs and believe - in order that, by believing, we, though we are snakebit, may live. For as John closed out this gospel of his, "*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*" (20:31).

And all God's poisoned people said, "Amen."

"Thanks be to God. Amen."