

Numbers 21:4-9 & John 3:14-15

Abdul Rahman lives in Afghanistan. He is a medical worker there. Abdul has been a Christian for the past 16 years. Just recently his government found out that Abdul left Islam 16 years ago to become a Christian. To leave Islam is a crime in Afghanistan. A crime punishable by death. Abdul is being told, "If you keep looking to Jesus Christ as your Savior, we will kill you." As a Christian, Abdul knows that to look away from Jesus Christ means eternal death. To save his life he must turn away from Jesus, but to do so is to perish in hell.

Tell me, if you know, why is it that someone like Abdul will hold on to Christ so tightly even though it means certain death, but here in America where it is not illegal to look to Jesus Christ, so many turn away from Him? What are you looking at? Are your eyes fixed upon Jesus, "the Author and Perfecter of your faith?" Do your eyes fix upon His Word at home? Do they fix upon Christ here in His House? Or have your eyes wandered from Christ, even though no one is forcing you to turn away from Him by pointing a gun to your head?

The Israelites had no choice. They were dying from snakebites in the desert. They had to keep their eyes fixed upon the bronze snake up on a pole, or else they would die. The snakes came among them because they grumbled against God and Moses. God was caring for them. He was providing manna for them to eat and water to drink. They were defeating every enemy that attacked them because God was with them. And yet they grumbled. "We think you're doing a lousy job as God!" was their complaint. "We want you to do things our way...we want to be our own god." They threw God's blessings back in His face.

And so the snakes came. They bit the people and many died. Suddenly the people wanted God to be God again. "Pray for us, Moses!" they cried. "Tell Him to remove the serpents from us." Instead of removing the deadly serpents, God did an interesting thing. He told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Anyone who was bitten by a snake could look at the serpent on the pole and he would live. To ask our question of the Israelites, "What are you looking at?" you would get the same answer from everyone, "That snake up on a pole." "Why?" "So I don't die...so that I live."

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life." (John 3:14-15) You, too, have been bitten by a snake. The deadly Serpent bit our parents in the Garden of Eden, and his venom has been passed on to all their children. You are dying of snakebite. The venom of sin is slowly but surely causing your death. Have you seen the wrinkles on your face? The gray hairs? The bones becoming more brittle? Have you experienced the other symptoms of snakebite—sickness, greed, selfishness, quarreling? Have you seen others dying around you? Every day in the obituary column more victims have succumbed to the snake venom. Your time is coming too. It's not a question of if, but when. Which one of us here will be the next one to go? Someone old, or someone who is young? The venom of sin causes death at any age.

Is there hope? Yes. Friend, God came into this snake pit to die for us. Jesus was lifted up on a cross and there He died. As God's people in the desert were told to look to the bronze

serpent on the pole, so God tells us to look to the One lifted up from the earth bearing the sin of the world, so that believing in Him we will not perish but have eternal life.

We preach Christ crucified here. Unless you close your eyes and ears, you will always, by faith, see Christ here in His Word and Sacraments. You will see your Savior lifted up for you, and you will hear His saving words of life, “Whoever believes in Me is not condemned, but has eternal life.”

So, what are you looking at? You know how true it is that our eyes often wander away from Christ—away from His Word and Sacraments. Instead of fixing our eyes on Jesus, we gaze at our neighbor and look for the sins in his life. We put our eyes where they don’t belong—on television shows that are immoral, on websites that are wicked. Instead of fixing our eyes on Jesus we gaze, day after day, at all our troubles. We’re so busy complaining of how bad things are that our eyes have lost sight of the goodness of God and His blessings to us. Instead of fixing our eyes on Jesus, we fix them on everything else—work, school, play, hobbies have occupied our lives to the point that our eyes have wandered away from Christ.

Friend, do you forget so quickly that you are dying? The snake venom is in your heart, and veins, and mind. To look away from Christ is to die! Put yourself with me in the desert some 3,500 years ago. The snakes are crawling everywhere around you. They are biting you and your loved ones, your neighbors and friends. God’s words are clear. His promise is unmistakable. “Keep looking to the serpent on the pole and you will live!” When would you stop looking? Wouldn’t you, rather, tell your children, “Look at it! Don’t stop looking! No matter what, keep looking!” You would accept no excuses from them, nor they from you. Too tired? Too busy? No! Nothing is more important than fixing your eyes on the pole!

And that truth has not changed in 3,500 years. Looking to Christ, trusting in God’s promises in Jesus—nothing in life matters more than that. What are you looking at?

Here’s a question we need to ask...What is God looking at? The answer: The same thing He wants you to look at—His Son on the cross. Your Heavenly Father is busy looking, not at your sins, but at Him who was lifted up to pay the price for your sins. Your Heavenly Father is looking, not at how often your eyes wander from Christ, but at the blood of Christ poured out for you and given to you in the cup of salvation. Your Heavenly Father fixes His eyes upon Jesus and so He does not see your grumbling or hear your complaining. Rather, He forgives you. For Jesus’ sake, He forgives you. Your Heavenly Father refuses, absolutely refuses to take His eyes off of Jesus who died for you, and therefore your Savior always stands before Him pleading for you as Moses pleaded for the Israelites. And as God showed mercy to them, so He shows mercy to you.

He knows how weak our eyesight is. He knows how easily we, like Israel, close our eyes to His love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. But His eyes remain open, beholding always the cross of Him who died for you—always forgiving you, and strengthening you...allowing you to fix your eyes on Jesus, for on our own we would never do that.

One wonderful way He does this is by placing you into a congregation of believers. This is your family of the Church. As the Israelites surely encouraged each other to keep looking

to the snake on the pole, so we have that privilege with each other. Rebuke, discipline, love, pray for each other, be examples to each other. We need each other to help each other look firmly to Christ in Word and Sacrament.

When one within our family of believers has wandering eyes, God uses us to point their eyes back to Christ. When one in our family is suffering from an illness or other troubles, what a privilege for us to encourage them to fix their eyes on Christ who suffered and died for us all. When one within our family is close to death, we can remind that child of God that as we fix our eyes on Jesus, we live even though we die. That nothing, not even death, can separate us from His love for us.

And so when we finally close our eyes in the sleep of death, we can do so in peace and joy, because Jesus was lifted up on the cross for us to give us life. And when our eyes shall open again in heaven's glorious light, the snakes will all be gone, but we shall see Jesus and we shall be forever with the Lord. Amen.