

Numbers 21:4-9

“Don’t drink and drive.” You would have to be a hermit living far away from society to not be familiar with this phrase. And yet we know how often these words of warning are ignored. Another warning phrase which is catching up in popularity because of our modern cell phone technology is this one: “Don’t text and drive.” Reading and sending text messages while driving is quickly becoming a leading cause of accidents on our highways, especially among teenagers. When the cell phone buzzes on the seat next to you, the temptation to see who is sending a message and what that message is, is overwhelming and eyes are, all too often, taken off the road ahead.

The Israelites did not face this temptation as they journeyed through the desert. They didn’t have cell phones; they didn’t have vehicles. But their eyes, nonetheless, were looking at the wrong things. They were focused upon their tired legs...their aching feet...the hot sun beating down upon them. Rather than looking ahead toward the Promised Land, they were looking at each difficult step along the way. They were looking at themselves...their problems...at their one-item menu for breakfast, lunch, and dinner—manna! No matter how many ways they prepared it, it was still manna; and they were sick and tired of it and they complained.

And it might be tempting for us to say here that God became sick and tired of their complaining and so He sent fiery snakes among them and many died. But that would not be true. The fiery snakes were not an act of punishment, but an act of love. It’s not because God was fed up with the Israelites that He sent the snakes; it’s because He cared for them and loved them that He sent them.

The people were in trouble and not because of the snakes. Before He sent them they were in trouble because they were taking their eyes off of the promises of God. They were looking away from His leading and guiding. They were no longer focused upon His mercy and love for them. They grumbled against Him. They grumbled against His man in their midst...Moses. They were so focused on themselves, and what they did not have, and what they wanted that they, without realizing it, had stopped looking to God with eyes of faith. They were perishing and they needed help. So out of love, God sent fiery snakes among them. And this now forced the people to look to God for help. The manna was not a problem anymore. Their tired legs and aching feet were not problems anymore. Their eyes now were focused on one thing—the snakes—and seeing the snakes and all those around them who were dying, the people turned to Moses and cried, “We have sinned! Please help us!”

That may be why you are here today. You see the snakes all around you and you are here for help. The fiery snakes are everywhere...Augusta, Washington, Marthasville, St. Louis, and everywhere in between. They’re eating away at your investments and causing money problems. They’re causing troubles in your marriage. They’re making you sick—heart disease, lung disease, cancer. They’ve bitten friends and loved ones, and you’ve seen them die; and you may be next. And so you’ve come today to the House of the Lord and you cried the words, “I have sinned! Please help me. Please take the fiery snakes away!”

But that’s not the help we need. Had God removed the snakes from among the Israelites, how long do you think it would have taken before they would have taken their eyes off of

the mercy and love of God and began grumbling again? A few hours? A few days? A few weeks? No, the answer was not in removing the snakes; it was in fixing the eyes of the people upon the promises of God. And so God told Moses to make a bronze snake and lift it up high on a pole and everyone who looked at that bronze snake would be saved.

And that is why God has brought you here today, because the problem is really not with the snakes in your life. The problem is not Bernie Madoff and his investment scam. The problem is not with Wall Street and the loss of many jobs. The problem is not with cancer, and heart disease, and a marriage that has cooled off. The problem is that you and I have been taking our eyes off of our Lord and Savior. We have not fixed them upon the promises in His Word. We have not been looking toward the Promised Land. We have been looking at ourselves; at the cell phone buzzing next to us; at what we want and what we don't have. And we think we're still living as God's people, like the Israelites thought, but in reality we're walking often by sight and not by faith.

Isn't that why we grumble like they did? Instead of living thankful lives, we grumble against our spouse, against our children, against our parents. We grumble against those leading us in our country, our community, our church. "He said this to me!" "She did that to me!" And we grumble. We complain that God could do more to help us. We complain that others are faring better than we are. The problem is not with all the snakes making our life difficult. The problem is that we are wretched sinners who often live with eyes fixed not on God's promises; not on the road ahead where He leads us, and we are in danger of perishing.

So God sends snakes into our lives. He allows the Bernie Madoff's to come along. He allows sicknesses to come...problems to come. He sends the snakes into our lives so we look to Him for help; so we see our weakness, our wretchedness, and repent of our sinfulness and seek His grace. How many Israelites would have fixed their eyes on that bronze snake on the pole if God had never sent any fiery snakes among them? None of them. And neither would we. Before God draws us to His House where Christ Jesus is lifted up before our eyes, He often sends snakes first so that we come here with searching hearts; so that we come looking for and seeking His mercy; so that we come not with hardened attitudes, but as repentant sinners in need of forgiveness.

And because you are here, the word is in your ear today: "Look to Christ lifted up here for you, and you are saved." Now Moses did not tell the Israelites, "Think about the bronze snake on the pole;" he said, "Look at it!" He did not say, "Look once and then walk away;" he said to them, "Fix your eyes on the bronze snake on that pole and you will live."

That bronze snake is Christ, and He is not in your pillow, or out in your garden, or inside your golf bag; He is in His Word and Sacraments for you. It's good for us to meditate on Christ. It's good for us to think of our Savior often, but the promise of life in His name, as our Lenten Gradual puts it, is in "fixing our eyes upon Him." The Israelites had to physically fix the eyes in their head upon that bronze snake up on the pole. And so you and I physically come to the House of God and fasten our eyes on His Word, and our ears upon the hearing of it, and physically taste the Sacrament of His Body and Blood with our mouth. These holy things are Christ. This is Christ Jesus for you. You are not saved by your action of fixing your eyes on Him; but you "are saved by grace through faith." Because you believe the Word of Christ, you fix your eyes upon it.

Every Israelite who looked to the bronze snake lived; and this life is for you. And so, while “driving your car,” don’t mess with your cell phone. If you don’t watch the road ahead, you will lose focus and perish. We are journeying, as the Israelites were, toward the Promised Land of heaven. We keep our eyes ahead, fixed on Christ. We don’t let the buzzing temptations around us draw us away from Him. When driving a car it’s never that we focus on the cell phone and other distractions while glancing every now and then at the road ahead. That’s backwards. And so is focusing our attention in life on everything but Christ and His Word, but just glancing at Him every now and then. “Fix your eyes!” Moses told the people. And so with us.

And it’s amazing what you see when you fix your eyes on the bronze snake who is Christ. You see your God who, out of love for you, lay down upon a cross. You see your God being raised high on a lonely hill, covered in blood, covered with your sins. You see your God crying out in agony, punished with the fires of hell for every sin that we have done. And you see your God shouting in triumph, “It is finished!” Your salvation...your life in Him...your future in heaven...it’s all finished for you by Christ Jesus. This is what we see as we look at Christ lifted up here for you.

Moses raised that bronze snake high for all the people to see. And that’s what is done here, so no matter who you are; no matter how low your sins have brought you—you see Christ here for you. Do you see the Bronze Snake? It’s in the Word reaching your ears right now. You are forgiven of all your sins. You will not perish. You will live...forever in heaven. Jesus was raised up on a cross for each one of you. He died there for each of you. Yes, you...even with all the guilt you have; even with your sinful habits...He is your Savior too. Not one of you here must turn your eyes away. His cross is for all of you. His blood was shed for each of you.

You’re going to deal with fiery snakes your entire life. But that’s okay, because you have Jesus for life. And if those snakes keep you humbly looking to Him, then all they really are—are blessings from God. “Fix your eyes on Jesus!” “Look to the Bronze Snake and live!” These are not harsh words of command. They are words of love; of God’s mercy toward you. These are words of invitation, and they are for you. Amen.