

Numbers 21:4-9

Many people are terrified of snakes. Even watching them behind thick glass at a Reptile House down at the local zoo makes them squeamish. Those who handle snakes and work with them tell us there is no need to be frightened of them. They say that snakes are more afraid of us than we are of them. This was hardly the case in our text. The fiery, or venomous, snakes were on the attack. This was not a case where ‘if you leave the deadly snakes alone, they will leave you alone.’ They were biting the people. They were after them and the people were dying. If something was not done, and quickly, there would be no one left alive.

Like these snakes, God’s accusing Law will not leave us alone. It’s not a case where if we ignore God’s Law, we have nothing to fear from it. The Law of God, like the serpents, is on the attack. It’s after us, and it knows where to find us. And there is venom, deadly venom, in its bite. One bite--just one bite of the Law brings death.

But it’s not as though we do not deserve this. In the desert, God’s people were complaining. They knew God was leading them. They knew that He was taking care of them. Still they complained. They grumbled at God and at His servant, Moses. They would have preferred a different god...any god...themselves as god to lead them according to their will, their likes and pleasures. Had God’s people not grumbled against Him, the snakes would not have come. They brought the snakes upon themselves by their own sinfulness. And so do we. God’s Law is not a deadly serpent to the man who commits no sin. But because we all sin against God, His Law comes after us with its biting words: *“The soul that sins shall die!”*

It would be easy for us to say that God sent the snakes to punish His people. This is how we think today. When our sins cause problems for us, we assume that God is punishing us for doing wrong. But look at this from a different perspective. How would God’s people have fared if He had not sent the snakes? It would have been worse...much worse. His people were rejecting Him. They were rebellious. They did not want His authority, His lordship over them. Had God let them have their way, they would have ceased to be His people. They would have become enslaved by their sins and perished, perhaps in the desert, but most certainly in eternal shame and torment.

The snakes were a blessing, therefore, because they acted as a mirror to show the people how wicked they had become. The snakes drove the people back to God. *“We have sinned!”* they cried with sorrow. And so God’s Law today acts as a mirror for us. When we look at it we see how we, just like God’s people of old, rebel against Him daily; how we are always trying to throw off His claim on us--the claim He made upon us in our Baptism. We, like God’s people in the desert, are wanting to be our own gods and lords. How we need God’s Law, therefore, to show us the error of our ways. How we need to open our ears here in church so God’s Law, like a serpent, will strike us with its deadly bite and bring us crying to Him.

And when we shut God’s Law out of our life...When a Christian stops coming to church where God’s Law is heard, or closes his ears to the Law, God may in mercy send His snakes anyway. He allows troubles to come to us...health problems, financial problems, even the death of a loved one--all these snakes God brings into our lives to drive us, with repentant hearts, back to Him. But how sad for the Christian who turns away even from such fiery serpents as these.

For you, and for all who come to God crying, *“We have sinned!”* there is help and there is hope. He does not take the snakes away. His Law stays with us because we need it. Without the serpents, God’s

people then and today would turn back into a life apart from Him. But God helps us by giving us the antidote to the snake venom. In the desert Moses put a bronze serpent on a pole and anyone who looked to that serpent would live. And for us, Jesus was raised up on a pole that all who fix their eyes on Him will live even in the midst of a dying world.

Now it is important for us to take note here of what Moses did not say. He did not say to the people, "*Envision in your mind a bronze serpent on a pole.*" No, he told them to physically look at the snake in order to live. And so you and I today do not just envision Jesus. We physically come to God's House. We hear His words with our flesh and blood ears. We physically come up to His Table where we eat His Sacrament with our very mouths. This is how we fix our eyes on Jesus.

Moses did not say, "*Each one of you set up your own bronze snake in your own tent and then look at it.*" No, there was only one bronze serpent for the entire congregation to look at in order to live. And so today we worship as a congregation, and together fix our eyes on Jesus, together confess our sins and receive His absolution, together come up to the Sacrament. We do not become little "congregations" unto ourselves. We do not become our own pastors, our own teachers of the Word.

Moses did not tell the people to suck out the snake venom and dress their wounds with alcohol. The people could not live apart from fixing their eyes on the bronze serpent. And neither can we. Jesus alone is the answer to God's Law which accuses you because He allowed the Law to accuse Him. Jesus hung on the cross where the fiery serpent of the Law struck Him again and again. He took your place under that Law and He was condemned for you. God's Law sunk its fangs into Jesus and put its deadly venom into Him. And He died. He died in your place. But He rose from the dead. And so His blood is now the antidote to the Law's threats and accusations. And you are washed in His blood in your Baptism. And here at the altar, Jesus gives you His blood. His blood keeps you safe from the deadly bites of the serpent because His blood *cleanses you from all sin.*"

You live in a dying world, but you do not need to fear. The serpent of the Law will continue to bite you because we are sinful. But you live in the blood of Jesus. Forgiveness is yours, for each one of you. All your rebellion against God is forgiven. The serpent cannot kill you. Jesus shed His blood for you, and here in Word and in Sacrament His blood is given to you.

I guess you could say that God's House is a Reptile House because His law bites sinners here with its threats and accusations. But Jesus is here with you. When the Law bites you--and it always will, for we are sinners who daily disobey it--but when it bites, Jesus is here for you to fix your eyes on Him. He forgives, He heals, He comforts. And His blood gives life to you. It is the anti-venom, and it is always, always here for you. Amen.