

Thank God for snakes. A pastor said this once to a father and his grown son in Oklahoma, who were in the hospital after being bitten by rattlesnakes on a snake hunt. They were members of his congregation, but they never came to the Divine Service. He went to the hospital to speak with them. He pointed them to Jesus. And then he prayed something like this: “Thank You, Lord, for snakes. It’s because of snakes that these beloved sons of Yours have had the privilege of being reminded of their own mortality, and of their Savior, Jesus Christ. And if they ever forget, please send them more snakes.”

I wonder if the Israelites out there in the wilderness were grateful for the snakes. Maybe not, but God did use them, didn’t He, to bring them back to Him? They were in a bad way. They were sick and tired of the wilderness. Sick and tired of the manna they were eating day in and day out. They spoke in anger against God and against Moses. They were members of His congregation out there. But they had little, if any, love for the Lord. They were rejecting Him, rebelling against Him. This is not how faith works, but rather unbelief.

And so, God sent snakes. Not rattlesnakes, asps most likely. The venom was like fire in their bodies. They were dying. Many of them were dying. The snakes brought them to Moses. “*We have sinned against the Lord, and against you,*” they cried, “*pray to the Lord that He take away the serpents from us.*” When a snake can do that, it’s a good thing. It’s reason to be thankful for such snakes, because God can, and does, save His people from the snakes.

He saved them by putting a snake on a pole. A bronze snake. There was no power in that serpent up on the pole; no power to save. But there was in the promise God attached to that bronze serpent. “*Everyone who is bitten,*” He said, “*when he sees it, will live.*”

It’s the same way with Jesus. Jesus says so, in fact, here in our text. “*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.*”

It’s the snakes. They’re among us, too. And they bite us. And their venom is deadly. “*The wages of sin is death.*” We are dying, and we will die.

Death has never been a popular topic. But especially not these days. Have you noticed? You hardly see funeral services anymore. These are being replaced by a “celebration of life.” Do you suppose the Israelites, out there in the wilderness, were having celebrations of life? They were looking death in the face, and they knew it. Death, for them, was ugly. They couldn’t run from it, or hide from it. Nor could they put makeup and lipstick on it and call it something nice, such as life.

A snake is a snake. Death is death. But life is life, and Jesus is our life. Yet He hardly looks like life up there on the pole. He looks more like death. And dare I say, He looks like a serpent. Because it’s true. Serpents are despised and hated. Most people would rather kill a serpent than look at it. This was Jesus. “*He was despised and rejected,*” writes Isaiah of Him, “*...and as one*

*from whom men hide their faces.*” He was a Lamb up on that pole, up on the cross. But He can also be called a serpent up there.

In Eden, God cursed the Serpent, for he is the one who brought sin and death to us. And these are here to stay. The Israelites asked God to remove the snakes. No, He would not do that. Just as He does not cause sin and death to be removed from among us. God saved them from the serpents in a different way. The bronze serpent on the pole; the promise attached to that serpent: “Look at it, and you will live.”

Friend, God will not remove the serpents from you either. But He does remove their curse. He places their curse on Jesus. He becomes a serpent up on the cross. Hated, despised, and even more, He becomes the Accursed One, for *“cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree,”* writes the Apostle.

And so, let us “fix our eyes on Jesus,” as we are called to do in Lent. See His wounds, His sufferings. See Him dying on the tree. But look closer and see your sins on Him. Everyone of you, every sin of yours – it’s all on Jesus.

You and I are the sinners, but Jesus is the One cursed by God for our sin. You and I are mortal beings. We are dying, and we will die. But see Jesus looking death in the face, your death. He let’s death swallow Him up so that He would burst it apart by His resurrection. And so, death too, is not a curse anymore. Jesus turned death into life for you.

This is what your baptism means. You already died there in the water with Jesus. And that death became life for you, for in those same waters you were raised with Jesus. There is your celebration of life. In your baptism. There is where death becomes life, because we die and rise with Christ.

And your sin has nothing to say about this, because your sin is on Jesus. And if it is on Him, it is not on you. You’re forgiven. You are forgiven of all your sin. It cursed Jesus, and so it cannot curse you. It cannot damn you. Jesus took your sin and He endured hell’s damnation for you.

And so, my friend, why would you ever take your eyes off Jesus? Why would an Israelite take his eyes off the bronze serpent? He wouldn’t. To fix his eyes on the serpent on the pole meant life for him.

If you have taken your eyes off Jesus in the past, now is the time to put them back on Christ and keep them there on Him. Jesus is your life. And here, in the Divine Service, is where He fixes our eyes upon Him.

Sometimes it takes a snake to bring us back, to put our eyes back on Jesus. When that happens, thank God for that snake.

Right now, right here, the Son of Man is lifted up in your midst. Here is the Word of the Cross. Here are the Sacraments which place Jesus before your eyes. No matter where your eyes have been, the promise is for you. Put your eyes on Jesus, and you will live. Amen.