

## "It's About the Cross"

Text: Numbers 21: 4-9

5/6/2018

Well the Easter season is drawing to a close - after today we will celebrate the Ascension, this Thursday, and then next Sunday will be the 7th and final Sunday of Easter. We've talked a lot these past several weeks about our Lord's resurrection from the dead, as we should, but we never want to forget that, for our Lord to rise from the dead He first had to die. And so the death of our Lord Jesus on the cross is still important.

One of the ways we remind ourselves of that is by looking to a cross as a symbol (the chief symbol, really) of our faith. And with regard to that I'm reminded of how unfashionable it is for those outside of the Roman Catholic church to use a crucifix (across with the body of Jesus still on it). We actually have one of those here at Faith, front-and-center behind the altar, and we're seeing it more and more in Lutheran churches, but when I was a kid you never saw a crucifix; it was thought to be too catholic. It's often said that, since Jesus rose from the dead He's no longer on the cross, so why would we want to picture Him as if He were?. What's become clearer over the years though, in Lutheran circles anyway, is that while an empty cross is certainly fine to use, and Jesus is no longer on the cross (that is certainly true), still a crucifix provides an added reminder that the cross is still the way of salvation.

Or to put it another way, our hope for the future is built on the resurrection, and we look to Jesus' resurrection as the guarantee of our own resurrection on the Last Day. But in terms of how God deals with us in the here-and-now, our faith is anchored to the cross. In terms of how we find God-in-Jesus helping us along life's way, it's about the cross. To that we now turn our attention ...

As we do, we return to our O. T. Lesson for today, where we hear again that:

"They (Israel) traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said: 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?'"(Numbers 21 :4- 5Q)

You will recall that, after being brought by the Lord out of slavery in Egypt, God's people Israel had sinned against Him by worshiping an idol: a golden calf. Part of the consequence for that sin was that they would wander in the wilderness for forty years before entering into the Promised Land - the Land the Lord had promised to give to their forefathers: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Forty years is a long time, so the people often grew impatient. What we have in today's text is a description of one of those instances of impatience.

When the people would grow impatient, they would often grumble against the Lord by grumbling against His servant: Moses. When that would happen, the Lord would send some sort of calamity upon them to discipline them, and in this text the calamity came in the form of venomous snakes, as the text says:

"Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died."(v.6)

The text goes on to say:

"The people came to Moses and said: 'We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.' So Moses prayed for the people."(v.7)

Then the text says something very interesting, as it says that:

"The Lord said to Moses: 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived."(vs.8-9)

The Lord always provided a way for His people to be saved from whatever calamity He brought upon them, for He was always merciful and quick to forgive. The instance in today's text is no different, as the Lord attached His promise to save Israel from snakes to a bronze snake which Moses set-up in the sight of the people. I wonder, when Moses first received God's instructions to make the snake, whether or not he might have asked this question: "Why? Why do You want me to make a snake and have the people look at it whenever they're bit?" For in telling the people to look at the snake, God was telling them to look at a representation of the very thing that was the source of their problem!: a snake. And yet, looking at that snake was the key for their being able to live instead of die, whenever they were bitten.

The same holds true for us today, whenever we look AT THE CROSS of Christ. In fact, John makes that connection in his Gospel when he says that:

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man (Jesus) must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life."(John 3:14)

Much like the Israelites 'of old' - who looked upon that snake hanging on a pole, when we look upon our Savior hanging on a cross, we are saved from all that would harm us. And the interesting thing is that, just as with the snake on the pole, so too with Jesus on the cross: we look at a representation of the very thing that is the source of our problem - death. You see folks, in Jesus' day crosses were used for only one purpose: execution by crucifixion - death! But to gaze upon Jesus' death, trusting it as the payment for our sins, is to gaze upon NOT a representation of

the problem, but its solution. It's about the cross, and when we make the sign of the holy "+" in remembrance of our Baptism - gazing upon our Savior's suffering and death for our sins - we don't die, we live; we live by faith in the Promise of God's Son. We live by faith in the Promise of God's Son -we live by the cross.

Ya know, there's something interesting in this text that we don't want to miss, and it's this: God did NOT take away the snakes. Did you notice that? Snakes are biting the Israelites; Moses prays that God would save the people; God tells Moses:

"Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live."(v.8)

I wonder if Moses thought to himself: "Why don't we just take away the snakes?" But God often does NOT take our problems away from us, especially when they're a direct result of our sin, as were the snakes for Israel. Instead, He meets us in the midst of our problems, telling us to do things that do NOT make sense to us, and then provides in those things the way for our salvation.

God always provided for the needs of His people, through His Word - especially their need for His forgiveness. And He does the same for us too, in the Word of the cross of His Son: our Lord Jesus Christ. John writes in his Gospel:

"God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son (and the implication there is that God gave His Son into death), that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."(John 3: 16)

And in 1 Corinthians St. Paul writes:

"I have determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."(2:2)

The resurrected Lord Jesus, in the witness of His Church, remains the crucified One ...

" ... the Lamb Who was slain has begun His reign ... "

we sing in the Hymn of Praise: "This Is the Feast." I don't know why, after Jesus' resurrection, God still chooses to work that way, but if I had to guess I'd say it's because it keeps us dependent on His Word. Keeping life with Jesus anchored to the cross keeps those who would live that life attentive to His Word. It's about the cross because it's about the Word, the Word of Jesus Christ.

And what does that Word say? The Word says that it was about the cross when on a quiet night in a town called Bethlehem the Savior of the world came into the world as a Baby. It was about the cross as that Baby grew into a Man, a Man Who was baptized and then tempted at the hands of the devil. It was about the cross when, on a quiet night in a garden of prayer, God's Son prayed that His Father would remove the cup of the world's suffering from Him. It was about the

cross when the Father did NOT remove that cup, but instead had His Son drink it down to its last bitter drop. It was about the cross when that Son of God: Jesus Christ, allowed Himself to be hung the following day - like that snake on a pole centuries before - on the "pole" of Calvary's cross, for the sins of the world.

Of course, as we've been hearing throughout this season of Easter, Jesus didn't stay dead; He rose again from the dead, to live forevermore on behalf of us all. BUT how was it that Jesus showed Himself after the resurrection? It was by way of the cross! John says that ...6

"On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them: 'Peace be with you.' When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side ...  
"(John 20:19-20)

Jesus was known by the scars of in His hands and His side; He was known by the marks of the cross! And it's the same thing in Luke. What does Luke say about Jesus' conversation with the two men on the road to Emmaus? Luke says that Jesus said to them ...

"O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into His glory?"(24:25-26)

Just as with Israel centuries ago, so too today, all who look upon Christ crucified are saved - saved from the bite of the serpent of all serpents: Satan himself, saved to live as God's people, both now and forever. You want to belong to God folks? You want to rise from the dead like Jesus, and live forever with Him when He comes again? Look to Him in His Word; look to Him on the cross (point to the crucifix here). It's about the cross.

Which brings us back to where we started. Sometimes God leaves the problems of life right where we do NOT want them to be - still IN our lives. But just as with Israel - whom God joined in the midst of snakes in the form of a snake, so too with us: God joins us in the midst of our lives of death in the form of death - a Man on a cross, to bring us life. It's about the cross folks. Look to that Man on the cross - look to Him by looking at your own "bronze snakes" of water and bread & wine, and the promises of God's Word. Look to the cross and you'll have life, the life of Easter -

- in Jesus' ✝ Name,

Amen