

A SERPENT ON A POLE
2nd Sunday of Lent (20 March Anno Domini 2011)
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Grace, peace and mercy from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, amen!

Venomous and deadly snakes were loosed upon the camp of Israel. People were dying and Israel was doomed. The Lord sent those snakes; they were His judgment upon this grumbling unfaithful and ungrateful people. Ungrateful for the gifts God had provided from heaven. Manna which fell every day except Saturday and fresh water that sprung from out of a rock. They despised the Lord's food. They despised the Lord. They detested their freedom and longed for Egypt, the place of their bondage. So God sent serpents.

Stricken, smitten, and afflicted, the people came crawling to Moses with their confession. ***"We have sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you."*** Confession is a good start. Tell the truth. Admit it and stop trying to cover it up, stop trying to justify yourself. We have all sinned against the Lord; against one another. In thought, in word, in deed, by we have done and by what we have left undone. You might as well admit and stop trying to deny it. The sting of death is all around you. Don't pretend it isn't here and you don't know why. Don't blame everyone around you. Own up to it. The Lord sent the deadly serpents to drive His people to repentance. Don't think He doesn't do the same with us.

They asked Moses to talk with God. ***"Pray the Lord to take the snakes away from us."*** The Lord sent them; He alone can take them away. Moses stands between; he's the mediator between God and Israel. Notice they don't speak straight to Yahweh. They go through the provided mediator - Moses, who stands in the breach between the God of Sinai and the people of Israel. Moses prays for the people about the deadly snakes.

Did you notice that the Lord doesn't take away the serpents? Instead, He provides a cure, the anti-venom. The anti-venom for the fire snakes was a sacrament, a sign instituted by God with a promise. ***"Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live."*** A material object with the promise of God attached. Look upon the bronze snake on a stick, and you shall live. And that's how it worked. Everyone who looked at the bronze serpent would live.

How can a bronze snake upon a pole do such great things? It's not the bronze snake that does them, nor the pole it rest upon, though if Moses had made a bronze squirrel or chipmunk it wouldn't have worked because that's not what the Lord instituted. This is the Lord's doing, not Moses'. It was a bronze serpent - the cure resembled the disease. It had the promise of God's Word attached to it - whoever looked on it would live.

Suppose you were an Israelite and your best friend or relative is lying on the ground, twisted in agony, bitten by one of those venomous snakes sent by God. What would you do knowing what you know? Would you say, "Pray the snakebite prayer and everything will work out just fine?" No. You would lift his eyes to the bronze serpent and the pole and say, ***"Behold the serpent of the Lord. Look upon it and live."*** Suppose you yourself had been snakebitten and survived because you did the very same thing. You looked on that hideous bronze serpent and you lived. Do you suppose you might be eager to tell your fellow Israelites and urge them to do the same? Would you worry about offending their sensitivities or not respecting their beliefs or pushing on their fear of snakes? No, of course not! You wouldn't take no for an answer, would you?

Penn Jillette, of Penn & Teller, that quirky Las Vegas magic act, recorded a video on his home computer that was on the internet a few years back. Someone alerted me to it so I watched it

recently. Penn is a devout atheist and is very outspoken about it. He incorporates a merciless criticism of religion in his show. But an incident after one of his shows really rattled him, and he made a little video about it the next morning. Apparently, a man came up to Penn after a show and handed him one of those little pocket Bibles. All the man said was something like, "This is very important me and something I believe very deeply, and I think you should take another look at it for yourself." He wasn't aggressive or hostile, just a sincere and honest man, and it really impressed Penn.

Penn said this in his video: I don't respect people who don't proselytize. If you believe that there's a heaven and hell, and people could be going to hell, and you think, *'Well, it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward'...* How much do you have to hate somebody not to proselytize? It like a truck rolling towards someone and saying they don't deserve to be saved". This is coming from a devout atheist. It makes you think, doesn't it? It sure made me think. And wonder whether I, in an apathetic sort of way, hate my neighbor. It made me repent too. Imagine knowing about the serpent on the pole, imagine being cured by that thing, and not telling anyone else in the camp. "How much do you have to hate someone not to proselytize?" I bet you never expected to hear that out of the mouth of an atheist, did you?

"God so loved the world that He sent His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him."

Humanity is snakebitten! You and I included. It has been that way since Adam and Eve listened to the snake instead of God back in Genesis 3. We are born snakebitten, dead with the venom of the Law coursing through our veins. ***"The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the Law"***(1 Corinthians 15:56). That's our condition from the greatest to the least of us. But God has provided the cure, a cure that looks remarkably like the disease. His Son on the cross, dying a cursed death. He looks damned by God, stricken, smitten, and afflicted, and He is, in our place, for us all and for our salvation. This is how God loves this snakebitten world. He doesn't simply love it abstractly and in general. "Oh, nice world, I love you or when you hang up the phone and respond out of habit, bye-bye I love you." He loves the world in a very specific way, and only in this way. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, true God of the Father, true Man of His mother, born of woman, born under the Law, to take on the sting of death and become for the world the anti-venom for snakebitten humanity.

The Father didn't send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to be condemned for the world. His condemnation is our acquittal; His death is our life. He came to be judged - one Man for all men, for all of humanity. He came to be lifted up and to draw all to Himself into His death.

As in the one man Adam, all sinned, all died, all are condemned, so in the one Man, the second Adam, Jesus the Christ, all are forgiven, all are justified, and all live. As Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness, so the Father has lifted up the Son on the cross that whoever looks on Him with the eyes of faith, trusting in that bleeding, broken, dying Son of Man, has eternal life.

Can you imagine how precious anti-venom would be if you were bitten by a poisonous snake. Imagine how grateful you would be if the E.M.T.'s that came to your aid had anti-venom with them? Far more precious, is the good news, that Gospel of free forgiveness, life, and salvation to the sinner! You have received it; you know what I'm speaking about. You were dead but now are alive.

Do you know how they make anti-venom? They inject the poison from a snake into a horse or goat (why don't we just substitute a lamb for dramatic effect), and then as the animal builds up immunity, its antibodies are collected. In other words, anti-venom comes from one who has survived the poison. Christ became sin for us, He who knew no sin. He was cursed for us on the accursed tree of the cross. He took the sting of sin with the full power of the Law's venom. He took it to the grave in His death. And then He rose triumphant over sin, death, and the Law. He survived the sting of death.

The anti-venom is here for you, in the water of Baptism. Here for you in the Word of forgiveness in absolution. Here for you in the Body and the Blood, the very death and life of Jesus, whose Body and Blood were given into death and raised from the dead to become the anti-venom of sin and the Law, the very “medicine of immortality” and eternal life.

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.” Look on Him (✠) and live. Point other to Him (✠) that they may live. The sting of death is sin, and the venom of sin is the Law. But thanks be to God; He gives us the victory, the anti-venom, the cure, through the blood of Jesus Christ our Lord. For in Christ Jesus you have victory over sin, death and the devil for in Him all your sins are forgiven for Jesus sake and in Jesus name, Amen and amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN. – Please rise for the offertory.