

COME, BEHOLD THE CROSS

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food. Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So, Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So, Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Dear congregation!

The events of our text took place sometime during Israel's wilderness wanderings when Moses was their leader. It speaks of Israel's sin causing the LORD to be angry with them.

Israel's rebellion against God had started already in Egypt, for there they complained when Moses and Aaron's pleadings for Israel's release only caused Pharaoh to become harsher in his attitude toward them. No sooner had Israel escaped from Egypt than they began to moan about the inadequate water and food supply. How often the Israelites wished they could return to Egypt, where – though they were slaves – they had at least enough to eat and drink! When God sent Israel manna to eat, they were still not satisfied. When He sent quail, they showed excessive greed. At Mount Sinai, shortly after God had established His covenant with the people by giving them the Ten Commandments, the people began to worship a golden calf. At one point in their desert march Israel was as far as the southern border of Canaan. The Lord wanted Israel to take the land. But the people were afraid. They did not believe that they could destroy the strong Canaanite cities by themselves, and they refused to take the LORD at His Word

when He promised to help them. The result was that Israel had to wander in the desert for 40 years.

Sometime toward the end of this 40-year period the incident of the bronze serpent took place. It was now decided to approach Canaan through the Transjordan and to attack the land from the east. But in order to get to Transjordan, Israel had to pass through Edom. Their request to travel on the king's highway through Edom was rejected by the Edomites, so Moses led the people toward the Red Sea, in order to go around Edom. With this detour the people became impatient. And they spoke out against God and Moses. It was the familiar refrain: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food." The LORD was quick to respond. He sent poisonous snakes called fiery serpents among the people with the result that many were bitten and died. It would be fairly easy to gloss over the aspects of this passage that we find troubling and focus on God sending healing right where we need it. There's no doubt that such is a part of the meaning of this text. But it's not all of it, and it doesn't recognize the harsh realities that the text holds up for our attention. What's happening in this passage is that the exodus generation is being weeded out and replaced by a new generation. The book of Numbers is coming to terms with the fact that the old generation will not see God's promises come to fruition. On this long, dangerous journey, some simply will not reach the destination.

Which raises another difficult question that this text raises: what to make of the failure of the exodus generation to reach the Promised Land? The narratives of rebellion in which God sends disaster upon some of the people function in large part to give theological meaning to the historical reality of the dying out of the earlier generation. The lack of faith they exhibited in the wilderness, the logic goes, rendered them unfit to inhabit the land. But what I find remarkable about the Israelites is simply the fact that they go on.

How do they do this? In the midst of their desperation at a journey that was even more arduous than they ever would have imagined, how did they go on? How would we, how do we, go on when faced with a similar circumstance? What do we do when something for which we have hoped and prayed and labored recedes farther and farther into the distance? If someone never reaches the financial security he or she has worked so hard for, if another is never able to heal a relationship that is long broken, if I never quite become the person I've imagined myself to be -- what then?

Again, God's provision of healing in this passage is instructive. Even in our worst failures and disappointments, God provides. God offers healing for our wounds, relationship for our loneliness, and faithfulness for our faithlessness. God doesn't remove the sources of our suffering, but God makes the journey with us, providing what we most deeply need, when we but look in the right direction.

And so, we can find our place in this story and what it has to say to us today. Like Israel we are on a journey. In fact, there are many journeys that you and I travel. The journey of the child or teenager is to get through school or to journey through adolescence into adulthood. All of us adults are travelling the journey of our career. And everyone, regardless of age, is journeying the pathway of life. As we travel these various journeys, there are many times when we also become impatient with God for taking us on what seems like a detour on the road to our goal. There are many complaints which, at least from our human point of view, seem justified. The child who has worked hard in school is discouraged when the grade she receives does not come up to her expectations. The man who has been faithful at his job for many years becomes disgruntled when he is passed over for a younger man to fill the lucrative new position that opened in his firm. The people living in shacks around our cities become disgruntled when they see the average South African feast on a steak and they have not enough food of any kind for themselves and their children. Such complaints we can understand.

But most of us have no real material needs, and yet we still complain. We may complain that our neighbor has a better car than we do, or because he gets one week more vacation than us. We are unhappy when our taxes are raised; we don't like it when charitable organizations ask us for money; we are annoyed when the church has another special financial drive.

When we fail to acknowledge that all our gifts come from God, the result is that we become more interested in the material things themselves than in Him who gave them. We become obsessed with material things and with our own pleasure. This can act like poison in our lives. The poisonous serpents of materialism and greed suck the spiritual life out of us, and so far as God is concerned, we are dead.

In the case of our text, God's reaction brought Israel to its senses. They came to Moses and confessed: "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you." It is significant that the people no longer blamed God. And before they even asked that the serpents leave, they confessed their sin. Then they added: "Pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us."

Moses did as the people requested. And then God told Moses to do something that seems very strange, something that reeks of magic, superstition and idolatry. God told Moses to make a bronze fire-serpent, to place it on a pole and lift it up and added the reassuring words that whoever was bitten and looked at the serpent would live. God can bring about his purposes by contrary means. As twenty-first-century Christians it may take us out of our comfort zones to imagine God as a dangerous, unpredictable presence in our lives. Yet, if we claim that we've got God all figured out, then we have ignored the mystery and divine freedom with which God is characterized throughout much of Scripture.

A domesticated, unmoving God does not pull a people out of slavery, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land; no, we need a God who is, in a matter of speaking, "on the loose!"

The Jews themselves say that it was not the sight of the bronze serpent that cured them, but, in looking up to it, they looked up to God as the Lord that healed them. And there is much of gospel in this perspective. Jesus has told us so in Jn. 3:14,15, that as Moses lifted the serpent in the wilderness so the Son of man must be lifted, that whosoever believes in him should not perish. We can observe the striking resemblance between Israel and us: first of all, between Israel's disease and ours. The devil is the old serpent, a fiery serpent. Sin is the biting of this fiery serpent; it is painful to the startled conscience, and poisonous to the proud conscience. Satan's temptations are called his fiery darts in Ephesians. But there's also a resemblance to Israel's remedy and ours. It was God himself that devised and prescribed this antidote against the fiery serpents; so, our salvation by Christ was the genius plan of Infinite Wisdom; God himself has found the ransom. The bronze serpent was lifted; so was Christ. He was lifted up upon the cross (Jn. 12:33, Jn. 12:34). "The serpent signified Christ, who was in the likeness of sinful flesh, though without sin, as this bronze serpent had the outward shape, but not the inward poison, of the other serpents: the pole resembled the cross upon which Christ was lifted up for our salvation: and looking up to it designed our believing in Christ." (Wesley) Some make the lifting up of the serpent to be a figure of Christ's triumphing over Satan, the old serpent, whose head he bruised, when in his cross he made an open show of the principalities and powers which he had spoiled and destroyed (Col. 2:15 .3). (***) Can perhaps add in the Sermon Illustration on pg. 5 here)

So, what does God do today when we approach Him in the way that Israel did? He directs us to the cross of His Son Jesus Christ, where He has done everything that we really need. In Jesus God shows us that it is not true that He does not care for us! In Jesus God had given us the ultimate gift, for His death is literally our death, the death that we deserved to die. When we look at Jesus, we see in what way God deals with our sin. He takes them on Himself in Jesus Christ, His Son. God himself has taken to the pole!

If Israel could be saved even by looking in faith at a bronze serpent that God had put there, how much greater is our salvation which consists in looking in faith at God Himself incarnate in His Son?

And together with the spiritual blessings that we draw from beholding the cross of Christ, come also the gift of food, drink and shelter that we need plus the appreciation that these material blessings come from our God.

Perhaps it is good for us to turn our attention to the God of the wilderness: dangerous, maybe, and unpredictable for sure, but always present, always faithful.

Snakes suggest to the Israelites that there is still an unpredictability to life; that survival hangs in the balance between life and death; that God is the source of our help and strength. We cannot on our own banish the snakes of our own bad behavior, the serpents of evil around us, the poison of our own words, shortcomings, failings. A way of escape is provided by looking at Christ and his Cross. In this Lenten season and throughout the year let us not fail to look there and be healed from all that threatens and troubles us. We lift our hearts to see the love of God who does for us what we cannot accomplish for ourselves. God himself has taken to the pole! Once and for all. So that all those who know they are dying in the wilderness can be healed. Look up to him and live... Amen.

