

**Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL**  
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**Worship Series: *Rethinking Religion***  
**Service Theme: *Rethinking the Solution to Sin***  
**Sermon Theme: *Lifted Up***  
**March 10, 2024— Numbers 21:4-9**

You and a friend are on a hike. The secluded trail takes you on a winding journey through sprawling live oaks. The bluebird sky and sunshine peek through Spanish Moss-covered limbs, as the sound of songbirds fills your ears. As the path ends, the trees open into a breathtaking view of a small lake, gently rippling in the breeze. It's an idyllic scene! One so enrapturing that you're not paying attention to your steps. Too late you notice the movement, and feel the strike as a snake sinks its fangs into your leg. But not just any snake—a Cottonmouth.

Immediately, panic surges through you. That's a venomous snake, and the clock is ticking. If you don't do something quickly, you're in trouble. But what should you do? As your mind races, your friend reassures you, "Don't worry! My kid's rubber toy snake is in my backpack. I'll lift it up, you look at it, and you'll be saved!"

What would you say? Probably something along the lines of, "Are you kidding me? This is no joke! I'm going to die!" Lifting up a fake snake doesn't seem like a very effective solution to a deadly problem!

I wonder how many of the Israelites in our sermon text thought that same thing. Instead of a couple people hiking through a scenic forest, the Israelites were a nation of likely over a million people trekking through the desert wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land of Canaan. Four decades earlier, God had freed them from slavery in Egypt, but what should have been a two-week journey to the promised land had stretched out over 40 years.

Granted, it had been their fault. Not for walking too slowly, but for failing to trust God. He had faithfully led them through the wilderness,

defeating their enemies and providing miraculous food and water for them all the way up to the border of the Promised Land. But when Moses sent 12 spies to check out the land God had promised to give them, 10 of them came back terrified, refusing to trust that God would keep his promise to give them the land. And the rest of the nation followed their distrusting lead.

So God sentenced his rebellious people to spend the next 40 years wandering in the wilderness until everyone from that unfaithful generation, except the two faithful spies, had died out. At this point, all besides God's appointed leader Moses had. So these Israelites in Numbers 21 were the next generation of God's people, the ones who would enter and settle the Promised Land! And yet, the untrusting attitudes of their forefathers hadn't skipped a generation.

We're told, "*[The Israelites] 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? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!'*"

This was revisionist history at its finest. "Our lives were so much better as brutalized slaves in Egypt! We had all the food, drink, PTO, and healthcare we could want! Why did God free us from such a wonderful life?" Obviously, I say that tongue in cheek. Wandering through the wilderness, the Israelites' lives were difficult in many ways. But their lack of contentment had blinded them to God's constant presence, protection, and providence, including miraculous manna; bread he'd provided daily for over 40 years, so they'd always have enough to fill their bellies-- the "miserable food" they complained about.

But as always, their sin had consequences. As a loving wake-up call to redirect their hearts and minds, "*The LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.*" If you have *ophidiophobia*, that's a pretty terrifying thought. Even if you like snakes, a horde of venomous snakes overrunning your camp and

causing the slow, painful death of many friends and family is still a pretty terrifying thought! They needed to find a solution to this problem—and quickly!

But while this next generation of Israel still got caught up in the discontented sins of their forefathers, unlike their ancestors, they responded to God’s wake-up call not with grumbling or complaining, but with repentance! ***“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. 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.”***

To the Israelites, a fake serpent on a pole might not have seemed like a very effective solution to a deadly problem. Through Moses, they prayed for God to take the snakes away. And doesn’t that seem like a better solution? Couldn’t God have just struck all the snakes dead? Or drove them away from the camp like he’d brought them in? Why have Moses lift up this bronze serpent, instead of just taking the snakes away?

Well, God offered this strange solution to the problem because it gave the Israelites an opportunity to put their full faith and trust in his promises! Now, understand, this bronze serpent Moses made wasn’t some sort of magic talisman that could heal and save them from the snakes’ venom. Rather, God had made a promise to his people, and attached it to that bronze serpent. By lifting up their eyes to that snake that had been lifted up, they were expressing their faith and trust that God wouldn’t fail to keep his promise to save them when they were bitten.

If you look to someone or something in a time of fear or distress, you’re expressing a trust that that person or thing can do something about the problem. If I was drowning at the pool, I’d look to the lifeguard and call out to them for help because I trust they could save me. But I wouldn’t look to a toddler in floaties, because I don’t believe they could do anything to help!

By following God’s command and looking to that bronze serpent when they were bitten, the Israelites expressed their faith that God would save them from the snakes’ venom.

And he did just that! ***“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, they lived.”*** By lifting up their eyes in faith, the Israelites acknowledged they couldn’t do anything to save themselves, and by faith received the rescue God had promised.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus points to that bronze serpent, God’s solution to the problem of deadly venom, as a foreshadow of himself, God’s solution to the problem of the deadly venom of sin. As he tells the Pharisee Nicodemus, ***“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”***

But “religion” objects to this solution to sin, “No! This is serious! We have to do something quickly about this problem!” WE have to do something!

That’s what every world religion—besides Christianity—says is the solution to sin. We have to do something to take care of this deadly problem. Religion teaches that the solution to sin is to stop sinning; to work harder; to be better; to perform the proper practices. Like the Five Pillars of Islam. Buddhism’s Eightfold Path of Enlightenment. The Dharma and Karma system of Hinduism. The perfectionism of Mormonism. The works-righteousness of Catholicism. The Sabbath regulations and dietary restrictions of Judaism. World religions propose such actions as the solution to the deadly problem of sin, each religion purporting the same basic idea: “This is what you have to do to get yourself right with God. We have to do something about this deadly problem!” We have to do something!

But our second reading from Ephesians shows the problem with that solution! We can’t look to ourselves or our actions to solve sin, because as Paul writes, ***“You were dead in your transgressions and sins.”*** The venom of sin is in us because of Satan’s bite, and it’s

eternally deadly poison! And notice what it says. Not “You will be dead if you don’t do something about your sin,” but by nature we’re already dead in our transgressions and sins; spiritually dead, and unable to do anything to save ourselves. To think that spiritually dead people can save themselves from sin is as pointless and hopeless as asking a corpse to save themselves from death!

By repenting of their sins, the Israelites admitted how completely unable they were to save themselves from those deadly snakes, and how desperately they needed God to save them. By looking to the bronze serpent, they showed their faith in God’s promise.

If you’re bitten by a venomous snake, there’s nothing you can do to save yourself—no matter how hard you work, no matter how hard you try. The only way you can be saved is if someone gives you the anti-venom.

Likewise, if we’ve been bitten by the venomous serpent Satan—which we all have—there’s nothing we can do to save ourselves. No matter how hard we work to be better, no matter how hard we try to stop sinning, no matter how long the list of rituals we perform, spiritually dead people can never save themselves from the deadly problem of sin. In fact, as spiritual corpses, we can’t even lift up our own eyes to look to God for rescue! Only by God’s power and grace can we be saved.

Which is why the Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians, ***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”*** The only real solution to sin is God’s grace; his undeserved love.

It’s all by God’s grace. Because of the Israelites’ sin and lack of trust in God, they absolutely deserved to die from the venom of those snakes. And because of our sins and our lack of trust in God, we absolutely deserve to die from the venom of our sin. But in God’s mercy, both times he lifted up something in order to save his people. The bronze serpent on a pole, and 1,400 years later, the Son of Man and Son of God, lifted up on the cross.

In both cases, God attached a promise to those things he lifted up. From the moment the deadly venom of sin first entered into Adam and Eve’s bloodstreams and spread to all God’s creation, God warned Satan in the form of a serpent, and promised to his sin-bitten children, ***“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hearts; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”***

Jesus did feel the pain of sin’s venom on the cross. Satan did strike his heel with suffering and death as he suffered the punishments of Hell, and gave up his life. But in doing so, Jesus crushed the serpent’s head, providing the anti-venom for sin, death, and Hell. And God attached the same promise to his Son, lifted up on the cross. Anyone who is bitten by sin can look to him in faith, and live!

By faith in the promises God attached to his Son, we receive the forgiveness and salvation that Jesus won for us and the whole world when he was lifted up on that cross, so that we can be lifted up to eternal life in Heaven!

So in times of guilt, lift up your eyes to him who was lifted up for you. In times of trial, in fear, in need—lift up your eyes to him who was lifted up for you. The solution to the deadly problem of sin is so incredibly simple. It’s not, “We have to do something!” but “Jesus has already done everything!” Therefore, lift up your eyes to him in faith, trusting that through Jesus, sin is solved, and we are saved!