

March 10, 2024
The Fourth Sunday in Lent: *Laetare* Sunday
St. Stephen's, Catlett; St. Andrew's, Ada
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Numbers 21:4-9
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

Just when we think we know all we need to know about Jesus, the Gospel throws us a curve ball. Turns out that in addition to being the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world, Jesus is also the Serpent of God, the embodiment of the countless serpents who were biting and killing the Israelites in the wilderness. Tempted but sinless, Jesus became our sin to remove our sin. We are the Israelites in the wilderness, begging for relief from the endless serpents all around us, and Jesus is the One on the pole.

The Israelites begged Moses to beg God to make the serpents on the ground go away. But did God do that? Not according to the Book of Numbers. Sure, God could have zapped the serpents right out of existence, but that did not happen. God can zap our own sin, whatever it is, right out of existence, but that's not happening either. Those serpents – and our sins – are still crawling all around our feet, and we have learned to be very careful where and how we walk in this life. The serpents are everywhere.

But no matter how carefully we walk in this life, we still manage to step on serpents every single day, and their bites are every bit as poisonous to us as they were to the Israelites in the wilderness. Remember what Paul told the Romans? No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't do the good stuff he knew he was supposed to do, and always did the bad stuff he kept trying to avoid. (See Romans 7:15-20 if you don't remember it.) Paul stepped on a lot of serpents, and his body absorbed a lot of venom. I'd say, with all due respect, that you and I probably step on a lot more serpents than Paul ever did, so how much poison have we accumulated in our own lives over the years?

Jesus told Nicodemus, and continues to tell us, that we can't avoid the serpents no matter how hard we try. They're like the poor; they will be with us always. The trick is to stop looking down, and start looking up. That's where the healing is. God said to Moses, "Everyone who is bitten shall look at [the serpent on the pole] and live" (Numbers 21:8). Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes (trusts) in Him may have eternal life" (John 3:14, 15). He says that whoever walks in darkness (looking down instead of up) is afraid of exposing the sin – the serpent bites. Whoever isn't reborn of water and the Spirit is stuck in eternal darkness. Those who trust God enough to take their eyes off the serpents and lift them up to the Living Serpent on the Cross immediately enter eternal life.

We can't have that life – abundant, much less eternal – if we allow our fear of the serpents to keep our eyes in the darkness of the ground. And here's something not everyone realizes: we always talk about how darkness falls, right? Well it doesn't. Darkness doesn't fall, it rises from the ground as the light moves away. And in fact, the light is stationary: we're the ones moving away from the light, allowing the darkness to rise until the earth turns once more toward the sun and a new day begins, at which point light falls on us and scatters the darkness. We are being told to trust the light that will return and not allow the rising darkness to steal our trust in the light. It hasn't gone anywhere. As long as we're looking up, the serpent bites are painful but not fatal.

If God were to zap the serpents and be done with it, would we have any reason to lift our eyes to the Serpent on the Cross, the bearer of everything that's wrong with us? Look up, trust the light, trust the Cross, and live.