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March 14, 2021
Sermon Text: Numbers 21:4-9
Because of Christ's obedience:
We are saved by grace through faith.

...SO THE SON OF MAN MUST BE LIFTED UP

There is a term for things in the Old Testament like the bronze serpent. It's called a "type of Christ." That means the serpent typifies the way Christ saves us. We draw this comparison only because Christ himself makes the comparison in the Gospel Lesson today: *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.* Speaking about the Old Testament Scriptures, the apostle Paul wrote, *Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.* The account of the bronze serpent teaches us about Christ and gives us hope.

Be assured, first of all, that the account of the bronze serpent is fact. It actually happened. After forty years in the desert wilderness the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land. No more living in tents. No more grittiness in their eyes or teeth. No more constant packing and repacking. A piece of real estate to call home. The Israelites had already defeated a minor, territorial king from Canaan who attacked them. The next step would be to enter the land of Canaan itself. Things were looking up.

They only needed peaceful passage through a country called Edom. The Edomites shared a common ancestry with the Israelites so there should have been friendliness between them. But Edom answered Moses' request for passage with a massive military force blocking their way.

There was no choice at this time but to turn back and make their way around Edom's borders. Try to imagine their disillusionment with this huge setback. The Promised Land was within reach, and now what might have taken mere days had been turned into an indefinite delay.

God tells us in Numbers 21, *They 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 desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"* We could criticize their lack of appreciation. After all, every morning the desert floor was still miraculously covered with manna by God's provision. And every evening vast flocks of quail from out of nowhere descended on the camp so that the people could easily grab them and then cook them.

We could criticize them, but it's easy to take something for granted—even a miraculous blessing—when it's all you've ever known for 40 years. A huge setback can make you frustrated with the whole situation—even the blessings that are part of that situation.

But here's the knife in our hearts. You'd think God would be understanding of such moments. He's not. He calls our behavior sin. Not the hurt of the setback, but the unbelief. He says, "I'm

taking care of you, and you doubt me?" In fact God hates our doubt, our impatience, our temper, our lack of faith so much He actually sent snakes into the Israelite camp, real snakes with real venom that killed people. God is dead serious. He is holy. He's ominous. There is no trifling with Him. He judges and kills and damns because of sin –regardless of how excusable it looks from our point of view.

Here is something remarkable about the Israelites though. They were savvy enough to make the connection between their faithless attitude and the snakes. Numbers 21 says, *Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 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.* When God gives us bad things do we connect the dots? Perhaps I was loving something more than God. It sure hurts when He takes it away. But for the hurt, I would not have known how much I was holding that person or thing more dear to me than God. Maybe I can't point to a specific sin that was the cause of my trouble, but at the very least it reveals how shaky and uncertain life is, and then what about after this life? When God puts trouble in our lives, it is because He has our salvation mind. He cuts with a knife, but not like a butcher. Rather, He is a loving surgeon skillfully operating to remove the cancer from our hearts. He hits us with trouble so that we repent and seek His mercy. That's what the Israelites did. "We sinned" were their first words. No excuses. The beautiful thing is, when we acknowledge our guilt, God takes it away.

Considering their desperate circumstances, it's likely the Israelites would have been willing to do just about anything to be saved from the snakes, pay any price, go through any ritual, expend any effort. And what did God ask them to do? Nothing. God provided a way for them to be saved that required nothing from them at all. Numbers 21 says, *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.* Through faith in God's promise, by believing what God said, that if they looked at the bronze serpent they would be cured, they were cured. It is always through faith in God's promises that we receive the things He promises. It is by grace we are saved through faith, and this not from ourselves, it is a gift from God, not by works.

And that is how the bronze serpent is a type of Christ. Sin was first injected in the human race when satan, in the form of a snake, tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Since that time we have all been suffering from the deadly poison of sin. Everything we suffer here on earth is because of sin. Ultimately it kills us. But just like the bronze serpent, Christ was also lifted up on a pole, a cross. Moses made a replica of the problem: a snake. Christ took on the appearance of a condemned, helpless sinner. Even though He was completely innocent He was punished with death. He sacrificed His life so that anyone who looks to Him and believes His promise of forgiveness is cured and saved. Through faith in Jesus sin can no longer kill us. The promise is that by Jesus' death you are forgiven. You are even forgiven for complaints, impatience and doubts. God ask you to do nothing. Only look to Christ.

It's worth noting that Numbers 21 does not ever say that God took the snakes away. It seems like the snakes became a daily reality for the Israelites. But with the bronze serpent God did provide a way out. God doesn't remove all our earthly problems either. He uses them to keep us aware of

the reality of sin. He uses them to keep us turning back to Him for salvation. But God gives us Christ as our way out. As God attached His promise of salvation to the bronze serpent for the Israelites, God attaches His promise of salvation in Christ to water in Baptism and to bread and wine in the Lord's Supper.

The Israelites took the bronze serpent with them as they traveled through the wilderness and finally reached the Promised Land. In the same way God gives us His Word and Sacraments to carry along with us, so to speak, on our journey thru this spiritual desert of earthly life until we reach the promised land of heaven.

Christ made the comparison. Just as the snake was lifted up, so the Son of Man must be lifted up. And why? Jesus said, So that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.