

**Lent 4 / March 10, 2024**

**Numbers 21:8**

**“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.’”**

### **The Serpent on the pole**

The book of Numbers takes place in the wilderness of Sinai during the forty years of Israel’s wandering, following their refusal to trust the Lord to bring them across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. The Lord turned them back into the wilderness, until the generation that refused to believe Him had passed away. The Lord preserved Israel in the wilderness for the sake of their children, who when fully grown, would trust the Lord and enter with Him into the land He promised their ancestors Abraham, Issac and Jacob. In the wilderness they learned to live with God by faith, looking to Him alone as their God and Saviour. God wants us to trust Him as our God and Saviour. He wants us to look to Him in faith through the promise of His love in Christ Jesus.

In the wilderness God gave the image of a serpent on a pole to heal those bitten by the serpents, sent as punishment for their sin. All who in repentance, looked on it in faith, were healed from the serpent’s bite and lived. The serpent’s bite represented the bite of sin, which affects all people and brings death in body and spirit. The serpent God commanded Moses to make and raise on a pole, represents Christ our Saviour. He was raised on the pole of the cross to make atonement for our sins. Jesus said, “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.” All who look on Him in faith are healed of sin’s bite through forgiveness in time and promised the perfect healing of eternal life in His resurrection. All who look to Him in faith have forgiveness and life.

The translators of the English bible named this book ‘Numbers’ because of the two censuses the Lord told Moses to take. The Hebrew title is ‘In the Wilderness,’ based on the opening words of the book. This better represents the spirit of the book, because the over all scope of the book is Israel’s travels in the wilderness. The book shows God’s judgement on the sin of persistent, willful unbelief. Israel refused to believe God time and again, despite the wonders they had seen. Despite the wonders they had seen, they continually longed to return to slavery in Egypt. They went so far as to accuse Moses and Aaron of bringing them out of Egypt to kill them. In the wilderness the people continued to complain. And while the Lord sometimes expressed His anger in the form of punishment, such as the fiery serpents in our text, He continued to provide for Israel’s needs, including healing from the serpent’s bite.

The forty years in the wilderness concluded when the last of the generation of adults who came out of Egypt, but would not trust the Lord to bring them into the Promised Land, had died. During the forty years in the wilderness, the Lord both punished the sin of the first generation, and disciplined the children of the children of Israel to trust Him. The Lord provided for their physical needs with bread from heaven and water from rock. He provided for their spiritual needs with the bread of His word, through which a person may live forever. In the wilderness the Lord teaches us that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from His mouth.

The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people of Israel, because they despised His salvation and wished they had remained in bondage in Egypt. The plague of serpents was a call to repentance. The healing through the serpent on the pole shows God’s promise to heal humans in our spirits through the forgiveness of sin. God provided the ultimate spiritual healing from sin and the bite of death, by giving His Son Christ Jesus, who was raised on the pole of the cross, as the all-sufficient sacrifice for human sin. On the cross God made Him who had no sin to be a sin offering, that all who look upon Him in faith may receive the spiritual healing of forgiveness and have life eternal in His resurrection.

Israel’s great sin was their lack of faith in the trustworthiness of God. Despite the wonders they witnessed, the signs they had seen and the redemption they experienced, when their faith was put to the test, Israel would not believe God. Nothing is more valuable in God’s sight than faith that believes His promises. Abraham did not live a life without sin. He was not commended for his sinless life. He was commended for his faith. When his faith was put to the test, he believed God. King David committed many great and terrible sins. But when tested by enemies, grief, and despair, he maintained his faith in the trustworthiness of God. In His sins he sought forgiveness. His faith received God’s forgiveness. All the holy people of the bible were commended by God, not for their sinlessness. They were all sinful beings like us and all people. They were commended for their faith by

which they believed God and His promises. Jesus said to Thomas, "Because you have seen you have believed? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." Nothing is more valuable to God than faith in His promises, especially His promises in Christ Jesus.

God's love is expressed in two ways in the incident with the serpents. The first is His anger leading Israel to repentance. God loved Israel enough to call them to repentance. The worst thing God can do to sinners dead in their sins, is to leave them there. God was angry with Israel for complaining about their hardships and wishing they were back in Egypt. He could have left them in their unbelief. He expressed His love for them as His chosen people, by calling them to repentance by the serpents that bit them. The physical pain of the serpent's bite, awakened them to the greater spiritual pain of their sin and its end, eternal death. The physical death caused by the serpent's bite showed them the greater death of body and spirit that comes from sin. The bite of the serpents brought many in Israel to repentance that the Lord might heal them.

The Serpent on the pole represented the sin that brought pain, injury and death to Israel. The Serpent on the pole pointed forward to Christ Jesus who on the pole of the cross, suffered the consequences of human sin, paid its debt to God and made atonement for the world. In 1 Corinthians St. Paul said of Christ Jesus, "God made Him who had no sin to be a sin offering that in Him we would become and receive the righteousness of God." In the gospel of John, Jesus said, "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." God gave a bronze serpent to bring healing to His people in the wilderness. He gave His only begotten to bring healing to all people in the forgiveness of our sins through the blood of His cross. God expresses His love most fully in Christ Jesus, who was lifted up for our forgiveness.

The people of Israel accessed the healing God provided by looking at the bronze serpent in faith. Faith receives the promises of God. Jesus said to a woman who touched Him seeking healing from chronic bleeding, "Your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease." She was not healed because her faith, as if it was the source of healing. Jesus was the source of healing. She was healed, because her faith received Christ's healing. God healed those in Israel who looked on the bronze serpent in faith. Belief was the means by which they received His healing. Faith made Israel and the daughter of Israel in the gospels well, because it looked to God as the source of healing and believed His promise to heal.

In his first letter to Timothy, St. Paul calls Jesus the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe. Jesus is the Saviour of all people by virtue of His sacrificial death, by which He offered Himself on the cross as the perfect sacrifice to pay the debt of sin for every human soul. St. John wrote, "He is the sacrifice of atonement for our sins and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." He is the Saviour of all people through the sacrifice of His cross. God offered Israel physical healing through faith in the bronze serpent that was raised on the pole. God offers all people forgiveness and healing in relationship with Him through faith in Jesus who was raised on the cross. All who looked on the serpent in faith received healing. All who look on Jesus in faith receive the healing of forgiveness in time and the promise of life in eternity. He is the Saviour especially of those who believe.

There is nothing God values more than faith in His promises. There is no promise greater than God's promise of forgiveness and life in Jesus Christ. God bless us to see Him as our Saviour and believe in Him in our hearts. In Jesus' Name. Amen