

26 March 2006
Lent 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Snake bit?”

Text: John 3:4-21; Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:4-10

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Moses. The wilderness. Ungrateful people. Fiery serpents. Death. Repentance. A bronze serpent on pole. Faith. Life. It's a good story. But you know, it's not quite how *we* would have written it. *We* would have written something like this: the people became impatient and complained against God and against Moses, so God sent the fiery serpents. The people repented and asked God to take away the serpents. So God did! All the serpents went away, and they all lived happily ever after.

But did you notice? We're never told that God took the serpents away. I think we assume it, because that's the way *we* would write the story. But it doesn't say that. The story we heard simply tells us that in the midst of trouble and death, God provided a way out – a way of life.

And I think that's important – *terribly important!* – for us to hear today. Because far too often in this life, we look for the **Easy Button**, like on the recent TV commercials for a major office supply store. When something goes wrong and life gets tough, just hit the *Easy Button* and that'll take care of it. It would be nice, wouldn't it? And maybe we look at God that way. As our divine *Easy Button*. Going to Him when something goes wrong and life gets tough, and expecting Him to take it away, so that we can live happily ever after. Like serpents. Like family troubles. Like physical problems. Like sickness and death. Whatever turmoil pops up in our lives. And turmoil *always* pops up!

But God is not like that. It doesn't say that He took away the serpents. What if He were a God like that? It's hard to imagine what kind of spoiled-brat-children-of-God we would be then! But God loves you too much for that. Too much to *turn Himself* into a divine wish granter, and too much to *turn you* into a spoiled brat. So He *doesn't* promise to take away the serpents. He *doesn't* promise to take you out of the trouble and turmoil in your life. But what He *does* promise is to provide a way out – a way of life.

For God so loved His people that He sent them fiery serpents, that whoever would turn to Him should not perish but have life. For God did not send the serpents to His people to

condemn His people, but in order that His people might be saved through them.

That's John 3:16 with an Old Testament twist! But it is helpful to think of it in those terms, I think. For it helps us understand that God doesn't necessarily want you to be *happy*; He wants you to be *saved*.

Now, that's a pretty blasphemous thing to say in our world today, especially in America, where the pursuit of happiness is not everything, it's the only thing! But look around at what the unbridled pursuit of happiness has bred in this country . . . and what it has bred in us. The picture isn't pretty, and it's not what God desires for your life. And so if He has to leave a few serpents here and there in your life – not to punish you! – but to keep you repenting, to keep you turning to Him and relying on Him, to keep you from condemnation here *and* eternally, do you not think He will do it? Because He loves you. Because He has not promised to take you out of your problems, but to provide a way out – a way of life. True life. Not the plastic, artificial, substitute, imitation life of happiness and toys that this world holds before us – but true life. His life. Life which does not end, but will last into eternity.

And that is the life that He gives through His Son. And so we heard in the liturgy today: ***Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.*** (Introit Antiphon) And, ***Oh, come, let us fix our eyes on Jesus.*** (from the Gradual for the season.) For to fix your eyes on Jesus is to fix them on Jesus lifted up on the pole of the cross. To fix them on Jesus in repentance and faith, that this is the way of life in this world of death. For ***“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.”***

And do we not have much to repent of? For we *have* chosen the way of death rather than life. We choose it every time we make our happiness an idol, and like the children of Israel, grumble against God. When we grumble that what He has given us is not good enough for us. When we go running after images of pleasure in this world, thinking they will give us what we want. When we become too busy for God, because the pursuits of this world are consuming us. When we use the life and freedom God has given us in the forgiveness of our sins as an excuse to sin more! That the life of faith and freedom He gives us is a freedom *for* sin, not a freedom *from* sin. What was I saying about spoiled-brat-children-of-God before? It's in all of us, isn't it? And do we think we're snake charmers? That we can handle these serpents around us, so that while they hurt others, they won't hurt me? Really? I think hell is full of folks who thought they could charm the serpent, and lost.

So repent. Have you been bitten? Fix your eyes – and faith – on Jesus. For He is the Life who came into this world of death, to give life to us who were dead in our trespasses. ***For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not***

perish but have eternal life. *That's Numbers 21:9 with a New Testament twist!* That we who have the venom of sin and death coursing through our veins might by faith receive the antivenin of the blood of the Son of God. The blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins. The blood and forgiveness *washed* upon us in Holy Baptism, the blood and forgiveness *spoken* upon us in Holy Absolution, and the blood and forgiveness *drunk* into us in Holy Communion. The blood and forgiveness of Christ that raise us from the death of sin and our self-centeredness, and give us new life. That though we live in the midst of the serpents and turmoil in our lives, that *their bite* and *our sins* would not kill us or condemn us, and that we be not afraid of them, but that set free by the forgiveness of our sins and healed by Christ's blood, we would live and walk in the light of Christ's love. Doing those ***good works that God has prepared for us beforehand, that we should walk in them.***

And that's another reason why God does not simply take us out of our problems, and take our problems out of us. For if God solved everything for us, then there is no place for us to do good. No place for us to take care of the Garden, as Adam did. No place for us to give the love and forgiveness that our Saviour has given to us. And that is not good either.

For if the life and freedom of God means that we have freedom *from* sin but not freedom *for* sin, in the same way the life and freedom of God means that we have freedom *for* good works, not freedom *from* good works! Set free from our sin, set free from our fear, we are free to do good – not to save ourselves, but *because* we have already been saved. And since we do not, therefore, have to worry about ourselves, we can worry about others, and take care of them. Tending the garden God has grown around us. *The garden of our homes*, being the father, mother, husband, wife, son, daughter, grandparent, aunt or uncle God would have us be. *The garden of our work*, being the worker, boss, or friend God would have us be. *The garden of our world*, being the citizen, neighbor, and Christian God would have us be. *In all the gardens around us*, looking for ways to help others live in the midst of the serpents, and directing their eyes to the pole – the cross of Christ, that gives us life.

For all the gardens, all the good, can't give life. Only Christ can give us life. For He is the only One who has *ever* entered this world of sin and death and come out victorious. Only He can set us free from the sins that hold us captive. Only He can forgive the sins that so poison us. Only He can raise us from the death of sin, to eternal life. And this is the very thing He has promised to do! Not take away the serpents, but provide a way out!

And one day He will take us out. Israel did leave the wilderness and enter the Promised Land. And so will we. Easter proved it! Until then, it won't be easy, but it will be good. Until then, we live the life we have been given in Christ. And until then, we live in repentance and faith, constantly receiving the forgiveness, life, and salvation that we do not have on our own. That when the serpents come – *and they will always come!* – we will turn to our Saviour in repentance and faith, and rely on Him. For all that we have. And it is all

that we need.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus our Lord unto everlasting life. Amen.