

John 3:14 - “God’s Love in Action”
Pr. Kurt A. VanFossan - Lent 4B - 2024

The theme of today’s sermon is, “God’s Love in Action,” and it’s based especially on John 3:14, where *“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.’”* These words of Jesus refer to the incident recorded in our OT reading from Numbers, which is pictured on the front of our bulletin. At first sight the scene on our bulletin doesn’t look like God’s love in action, but it is one of the ways that God works through this fallen world to bring us and keep us close to him in repentance and faith.

Let me explain by reminding you of some of the background of this OT incident and how it’s fulfilled through Jesus Christ on the cross. My intention is not to put us to sleep, but to continue to turn our lives of whining and worrying about things that are out of our control, to lives of faithful prayer and witness of our faith in our Triune God who is in control of all things for our good—for the salvation of all whom God will eventually turn from their sinful ways to Christ for salvation.

Our text speaks of Moses and the Israelites some 40 years after God rescued them from Egypt. They were finally ready to enter the promised land of Canaan. But, *“from Mount Hor,”* just SW of Canaan, *“they set out by the way to the Red Sea [backwards instead of forwards], to go **around** the land of Edom.”* This caused the Israelites to become *“impatient.”*

Why were they headed backwards to go around Edom instead of through it? Because, as the LORD had told them earlier, the Edomites were descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, and God made it clear that the Israelites were not to provoke the Edomites to war (Deuteronomy 2:4-6). So when the Edomites refused to let the Israelites go through their land, they had to go around Edom. It’s not that the people didn’t know this, it’s just that they didn’t agree with God. They were more concerned about what was good for them in this world than about what was good for the Edomites in the world to come.

Sound familiar? Have you ever considered that when we as God’s people whine and worry about things outside our control, it’s a way of rejecting God and His promise that He’s in control of even the bad things that’s going on in this country or in our personal lives for the ultimate good—for the salvation of all whom He will eventually turn from their sinful ways to Christ for salvation? In our whining and worrying (of which I myself have been guilty) are we forgetting who we are, who God is, and why we’re still here?

Not only are we sinners deserving of eternal death, we’re also children of God who have been set free from our sins and death through our baptism and God given faith in God’s love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, and assured of an eternal future in paradise. Therefore, we have nothing to complain about! And the reason we’re still here in this fallen world, as God’s *“workmanship, created in Christ Jesus,”* is for *“good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them”* (Ephesians 2:10). These *“good works”* are mainly for the benefit of others, to lead them to Christ.

To help the Israelites remember these same things, and turn their lives of whining and worrying to lives of faithful prayer and witness, *“the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people.”* The word *“fiery”* most likely refers to the burning effect of the poison in these snakes, which caused many of the Israelites to suffer and even die.

The “fiery serpents” also caused the surviving Israelites to remember God’s historic love and power to save them, which dated back to the most poisonous of serpents, the one that Satan spoke through in the Garden of Eden. This resulted in the Israelite’s crying out to God to forgive their complaining impatience, and help them—to renew a right spirit within them which trusts in the word and ways of God.

In answer to their prayers, God instructed Moses to “*make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole.*” Then God attached a promise to the serpent. He said, “*Everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.*” Notice that God didn’t get rid of the live serpents. Instead He said that “*everyone who is bitten, when he sees it* [referring to the serpent on the pole] *shall live.*”

There wasn’t anything magical about the serpent Moses made. He made it from bronze, a common element from the earth. The power to heal was in the Word and promise of God, which He attached to the serpent on the pole. And the people demonstrated their faith or lack of faith in God’s promise by either looking at the snake on the pole or not looking at it.

We have similar things happening today through God’s Word and Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. God attaches His promise of the greatest healing—the forgiveness of sins—to the common elements of unleavened bread and wine. “*This is my body... this is my blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins*” (Mt 26:26-28). These things remind us of the ultimate suffering and death of God’s Son, who took on our flesh and the poison of our sins, and defeated them all through His death on a cross.

While Jesus, for a moment, hung lifeless on that cross, like the lifeless serpent on the pole in Moses’ day, unlike the bronze serpent, Jesus rose from the dead and promised to be with us always to continue to give us His new and eternal life. Our Lord fulfills His promise today through His Word and Sacraments.

The stronger God makes our faith in this Good News, the more He turns our lives of whining and worrying about the temporary things in this world, to lives of faithful prayer and witness of our faith in God even in the midst of the slithering snakes around us—the troubles of this world.

During last Wednesdays’ midweek service, I mentioned in the sermon that God often uses the devil and the troubles of this life to bring or keep us close to Him. “The devil,” says Luther, “is God’s fool.” He unwittingly ends up doing God’s work. Satan’s strategy [of bringing suffering into people’s lives so that they reject God] usually backfires on him by driving people to Christ rather than away from Him,” (*Grace Upon Grace, Spirituality for Today*, John W. Kleinig, p. 233).

May God continue to make us bold messengers of God’s love in Christ so that, during times of trouble, others will have someone to turn to for salvation.

All glory be to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Children’s Sermon] I was talking a lot about serpents or snakes in the sermon. Do you see any snakes in the church? [The serpent on the stained glass window]. That snake reminds us of when the devil tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God and eat fruit from the tree that God told them not to eat. When they ate that fruit, they were poisoned by the devil’s lies.

Did they run to God for help? No. They ran away from God. That’s what the poison of the devil (sin) does to us whenever we disobey God and do something bad. It separates us from God.

So, what does God do? He came to Adam and Eve and promised to send them a Savior. That Savior is Jesus Christ, who makes it possible for us to be welcomed back into the family of God by dying on the cross for our sins and rising in victory over our sins, death and the devil so that He could always be with us, and we could always be with Him.

So, now, when we’re tempted to do something wrong, or need help in any way, where does our God given faith take us? To Jesus by praying to Him and reading His words in the Bible, where we read that “*God so loved the world, that he gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*”