

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

What an odd story in our Old Testament lesson! There, sandwiched between the accounts of the defeat of the King of Arad and the defeat of the King of Sihon and the King of Og is this little story about grumbling Israelites, complaining about the lack of food and water, dissatisfied with the daily supply of bread and quail that the Lord had been providing to sustain them. This story relates how God sent fiery, poisonous snakes as a judgment upon Israel, killing many. And then it tells how God told Moses to fashion a serpent and put it on a pole for the people to see. Looking at the serpent would save them from dying; by inference, refusing to look meant death.

As I said, rather odd and rather cryptic. Taking the story at its face value, it's not surprising that God would afflict the thankless people for their grumbling. Nor is it surprising that the people would cry out to God in their affliction, and He would rescue them. It is a bit odd that God would have Moses fashion a serpent out of bronze for the people to look at, after all, we heard it last week; God had told them: "*You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth*" (Ex. 20:4). Nevertheless, that's what He told Moses; Moses did it; the people looked and were saved from death.

But that is not all there is, for there was something more hidden in this story. Moses doesn't tell us what it is, but Jesus does, and not surprisingly, it's all about Him, even if some of the details do surprise us. "*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.*" This statement by Jesus illuminates all that follows.

Jesus tells us that this Old Testament story foreshadows the Son of Man being lifted up, of course, on the cross. That's surprising for that makes the serpent lifted on the pole represent Jesus lifted up on the cross! How can that be? We wonder. The serpent is the very thing that has caused mankind such great harm from the beginning as Satan took on this form in the garden, deceiving our parents and causing their fall into sin. The serpent is the very thing that was biting and killing the Israelites in the wilderness. The serpent is very thing that causes us so much fear and dread as we see one. Yet, a bronze serpent lifted up on a pole is the very thing that the people were to look at and live.

But this *can* be, for this serpent had no poison in His mouth. And this is Jesus for us, who endure the fiery darts of the evil one that entice us to sin. We succumb; He did not. He remained sinless when tempted as we are (Heb. 4:15). There was no poison in His mouth, yet He was still lifted up as a serpent, if you will, carrying the iniquities of us all (Is. 53:6), made to be sin for us, so that, in Him we might become righteous (2 Cor. 5:21), that by His wounds we might be healed (Is. 53:5).

For Christ came for this purpose: to give life to those who are perishing in their sin, to bring salvation to those condemned by their sin, to give light to those skulking about in the darkness of sin.

But the Israelites' salvation depended on more than Moses fashioning the serpent and lifting it up on the pole. The people were finally saved by looking at the serpent lifted up. So also Jesus teaches us that eternal life comes to us through looking to Christ and believing in Him — and not just any Christ, but Christ lifted up on the cross. For this is how God's love was manifested — in the giving of His own Son to be lifted up on the cross and perish, and that, so that, by believing in Him given for this purpose, we might not perish but have eternal life.

The cross itself became an emblem for Christianity very early on. Christians knew that it was the means of their Savior's suffering and death. And yet, Christians received it as a symbol of their faith. Moreover, Paul can talk about the word of the cross and boasting in the cross. Luther also said, "the cross alone is our theology." And I don't take issue with any of this, rightly understood, namely as a shorthand for "*Christ crucified*."

But, I tend to favor the crucifix to empty crosses these days with the body of Christ on it. I'm not dogmatic about it; nevertheless, the Israelites were not instructed to gaze upon a pole without a serpent, and we worship not the wood of the cross, but Him who hung thereon for the sins of the world. That body on the cross — that "man on the T," as it was once described by a young Christian — focuses my mind on Him who was lifted up for me, to redeem me and forgive me all my sins.

And I know that several verses from our Epistle lesson today are favorites of Lutherans. You know which ones: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*" And they are great, but they too need to be read in Paul's greater context that speaks of our redemption through Christ's blood, for without that, this faith mentioned just hangs out there, divorced from its object. But the object of faith, as Jesus taught, as Moses foreshadowed, is the Son of Man lifted up unto death for us sinners, that we might look to Him and believe in Him, and walk in the light; that we might look to Him and believe in Him and be saved; that we might look to Him and believe in Him and have eternal life.

God grant this faith to us, and strengthen us in it as we partake of the Holy Sacrament, proclaiming the Lord's death, body broken, blood shed, till He comes.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.