

“Look Up and Live!”
+ 4 Lent B +
Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21
March 15, 2015

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!
The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day.

As a product of a Lutheran parochial school for every year but Kindergarten, God’s book was open every morning, right after a hymn, a prayer and the pledge of allegiance. Six days a week of Bible stories (Sunday School attendance was recorded at school each Monday) plus family devotions every night—well, let’s just say we Benke children thought we knew the Israelites as well as we knew the neighbors and the chances were, in most cases, the neighbors were nicer people than those whiney, bad-choice making Israelites. Barely, barely, had the Israelite slaves been miraculously led through the Red Sea on dry land out of Egypt before the complaints started.

The 40 year trek? It is not, as some have speculated, that Moses was a typical man and therefore unwilling to stop and ask for directions. No, it was for all their constant complaining that God sent them south through the Sinai wilderness, then north through the Sinai wilderness and then around the loop again a time or two because their lack of faith and constant complaining led to the judgment that not one single person who had been brought miraculously through the waters on dry land would set foot in the Promised Land; not even Moses, who saw it only from a distance.

Once source on this text claims that there are actually 50 stops that can be determined that Moses and the Israelites made before they crossed the Jordan River and captured the city of Jericho beginning their conquest of the Promised Land.

Today’s Old Testament lesson tells us what happened at one of those stops where, once again they are whining to Moses (poor guy) starting with, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” I mean, give the guy a break, pulling off a road trip with that many people (estimates range all over the place including 603,550 men in the army alone (Numbers 1:46) plus wives and children—potentially up to 2 ½ million; others suggest a much smaller number, maybe in the thousands or tens of thousands) but either way, it was no walk in

the park and he had neither a GPS or a TripTik from Triple A (though there was that cloud by day and pillar of fire by night).

Water is always an issue in a desert so they'd often get a little thirsty and had no food except for "this miserable food," the *manna* for which they were at one time profoundly grateful, but now, not so much – and there were no seasonings to plant or pluck to add some flavor to the manna – which, literally, means "What's THIS?" which is what they said when first it landed on the ground for them to gather and eat.

What's weird about the story is not the human behavior but God's sending "poisonous serpents" among the people biting them so that many of them died." This is not an image of God that gives comfort – even if you look to the Hebrew (which I always do through someone else's scholarly reading) where it says they were Hantashime Hashrahphim: "fiery serpents," with the word for "firery" being the same as the word for the fiery angels – the seraphim - God's messengers. The underlying meaning seems to indicate the children of Israel had gotten too familiar with the holy God – not trusting, not obeying but behaving as spoiled and ungrateful children – so familiar - too familiar, too close to the fire that they got burned. The word also suggests that the bite of the serpents was poisonous and that their venom burned as the fangs injected it under the skin.

That may be more than you wanted to know, but it connects directly to the Gospel for the morning. I don't like to suffer – I'm sure none of you do, either. We have all been in situations where we prayed for God to "take away the serpents" (whatever is biting us at the time) and while sometimes God complies, at lot of times God doesn't, at least not in the way we wanted. Doors close. Situations remain unchanged and we do cry out.

God didn't take away the serpents; God didn't shut the mouths of the serpents or break off their fangs, God gave the whiny men, women and children of Israel another serpent, a snake on a stick, making this, I suppose, one of the more strange events recorded in the first five books of the Bible.

Think of it, though, when serpents are at your feet, nipping at your heels, which direction are you looking? Down, right? Of course you're looking down so you can see where they are and

avoid them. Apparently that didn't work so well, but then again, a lot of things that people do to solve their problems don't work very well either, some of which the Bible calls sin, a walking away from God, an obsession with the problem to such a great extent that you're ignoring the One, the only One True God, who can deal with it.

But along with that snake on a stick, came a promise: "everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." That always puzzled me until I realized the obvious. The problem is down, the solution is up. That bronze serpent didn't accomplish anything on its own; there was no magic about it. It was not even a test of faith. It was simply there as a summons to see the solution God had already provided, to "Look Up and Live."

Our lives are like that too, I think, whenever we find ourselves wandering in a spiritual wilderness. I'm not making less of the struggles any of us face nor the fears that torment us when something is biting at us. I am suggesting that we also learn to look up and see what God has already done and trust that God is working even this painful situation for our good as we follow God's call. In his letter to the Romans Paul made the astounding claim that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus, not even being dead, as he reminded the Ephesians in what we read today.

We think that letter to the Ephesians is kind of Paul's last will and testament—the last thing he wrote before facing death in A.D. 64 when Caesar Nero had had enough of him. Not even that, the worst thing human beings fear, our own death, is a problem for God. In fact, our deliverance from death is a done deal because in baptism we were buried with Christ in His death so we might rise to newness of life – life eternal.

All of which brings us to the Gospel and its admonition for us to "Look Up and Live." Most of the time it's John 3:16 that gets all the attention on this Sunday of Lent ---as well it should---but look what Jesus connected it to, "Just 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." There's that snake on a stick again.

Over and over the Bible repeats the same message. Why? Because human beings don't listen very well and we don't learn very well. Even the Israelites, soon after, returned to their

mumbling, grumbling ways. They even took that bronze serpent with them, thinking it was magic, and kept it for hundreds of years until King Hezekiah (Numbers 18:1-5) broke it in pieces, because they had turned it into an idol. *Nehustan*, they called it, and they worshipped not the God who had saved them through it, but a serpent made of bronze and stuck on a pole.

So easily we forget the One True God and turn from the worship of our Creator and toward the worship of something created. That is, until God takes drastic steps. Jesus told Nicodemus that shortly He was going to be “lifted up.” The cross was so horrifying that the word “crucifixion” was never even mentioned by the Jews; they simply called it “being lifted up.” And there, on that symbol of shame, in all its bloody horror, God reconciled the world to Himself by an innocent life, sacrificed for us. When people want to know what our faith is all about, don’t ever tell them it’s about being nice or pious or well-behaved because as soon as you do, you know someone somewhere will catch a Christian not being nice or pious, well-behaved or non-judgmental.

One of my friends, Pastor Tom from Zion in South Minneapolis, asked the boys in the After School program at Trinity First what Jesus meant when he said, “For God so loved the world.” Who did that include? The African American young man said, “it means he died for the members of the Ku Klux Klan, too.” My friend was in shock – how could a youngster living as a minority in a society filled with the kind of hatred we’ve seen again in Ferguson, MO have such a good grasp on the immensity of God’s grace?

I believe he’s seen it lived out in the lives of his teachers – in the mentors in that program, Pastor Tom and Pastor Keith and the Holy Spirit has shown him what all of us need to remember: It is always and only by God’s grace that we have been summoned to “Look Up and Live” – to cling to the cross by the faith that’s come to us is there for all, and that means ALL who will look to Jesus, as a gift. That’s it. That’s all. Amen.

Now may our God who is always rich in mercy for Jesus’ sake lead us into His gracious light so that all our deeds and all our words may reflect His love into our own darkened world.