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Lent 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Merciful Serpents?”

Text: Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

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

The people of Israel were in trouble. Deep trouble. They were dying. If God hadn't intervened, how many would have died there in the wilderness? They hadn't learned much in 40 years. 40 years ago they grumbled against God and against Moses, and now they were doing it again. So this was not new. Grumbling, not patience, doubt, not trust, was in their DNA. What God had said was true: they were a rebellious and stiff-necked people. So they were in trouble. Deep trouble. They were dying.

So God had mercy on them and sent fiery serpents among them.

Wait! *Whaaaaat?* Oh . . . you thought . . . no! The people were dying not because of the serpents, they were dying because of their unbelief. They were **dead** and dying **in their trespasses and sins**, to use the words that we heard from St. Paul today. They were dying because they kept turning away from God and thinking God not good, not loving, not faithful, not trustworthy. And God, on more than one occasion, was ready to throw His hands up and give up on these people. But God is faithful and trustworthy and good and loving and merciful. So He did not. Instead He sent the serpents. *To save them.*

Or, to use the words of the Apostle John that we heard (slightly modified!): ***For God did not send [the serpents] to the people to condemn them, but in order that they might be saved through them.*** Because ***whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already.*** Their unbelief was the problem. The serpents were the solution.

And they did the trick! The people returned to the Lord. They repented. And once again, God was merciful and gracious. He instructed Moses to make ***a bronze serpent on a pole*** that could be lifted high, so that when the people were bit, they could look at this sign of God's mercy, this sign of God's power, and by faith in the word and promise of God attached to this sign, they would not die, but live. Both their physical lives and their spiritual lives. Or, again, to use the words of the Apostle Paul: ***But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive . . . by grace you have been saved.*** By grace. Because the people of Israel certainly didn't deserve it! It was a gift, from a merciful, gracious, live-

giving God.

Now what about you? Because this sinful and unclean, unbelieving and grumbling DNA that was in the people of Israel, **you, too, have**. Passed down from parents to children, so that when we are born into this world alive physically, we are at the same time born **dead in our trespasses and sins** spiritually. Though you *feel* very much alive, right? Especially when you're young and your whole life is ahead of you and full of possibilities! What are you going to be? Who are you going to marry? Where are you going to live? And that's exciting, and it's good. And it is exciting for old folks like me to watch you grow and mature and spread your wings as well.

But like cancer that grows inside you, that you may not even realize is there, but is growing and spreading and metastasizing, eating you alive, so it is with sin. That even though we may *feel* very much alive, the reality may be different. As sin grows. Sin which, for example, makes us think that our physical life is more important than our spiritual life. Could that be you? What do you spend more time thinking about and caring for? Do you read books and articles on health and nutrition, while the Bible stays on the shelf? Invest lots of money in health clubs and exercise equipment, but not so much for the work of God? Train and learn for a profession in life but not so much for your confession of Jesus as Lord? **But maybe this above all:** we think we have life and that God is taking that life away from us with all His rules and *thou shalt not*s! So we don't listen to them. We go against them, *thinking* that we are saving our life! When in reality we are doing the very opposite. I know this is wrong . . . I know I shouldn't be doing this . . . I know this is not what God wants . . . *but . . . !* But what? Is that not saving your physical life and jeopardizing your spiritual life?

So it was for the people of Israel in the wilderness. They were in trouble. They were dying. They thought they were saving their lives by turning away from God and wanting to go back to Egypt, but they were losing their lives; their spiritual lives were dying. **So God had mercy on them and sent fiery serpents among them. To save them.** Physical pain for spiritual life. Spiritual life that could come only by faith in the gracious words and promises of God. To be saved *by grace through faith*.

Do you think there is anything happening in your life right now that God in mercy sent or is using to turn you back to Him in repentance? Sometimes maybe we think God is punishing us, but remember: **God did not send [the serpents] to the people to condemn them, but in order that they might be saved through them.** And **God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world** (or you!), **but in order that the world** (and you!) **might be saved through him.** For that's what God wants: you. You with Him forever. You with life forever.

So God had Moses lift up a pole in the wilderness with a bronze serpent on it, and He had a pole lifted up in the wilderness of this world **with His Son on it!** That we look at Christ

crucified and live. That we look at this sign of God's mercy, this sign of God's power, and by faith in the word and promise of God attached to this sign, we not die, but live. And what is that word and promise of God attached to this sign? You know it well: ***For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.***

But this looking is not with our physical eyes, but with the eyes of faith. Seeing with our physical eyes is good and helpful, but many people see crosses or a crucifixes in our world today, and if all they see is a piece of jewelry or art, it does them no good. There is no salvation in that. But if we see there our Saviour, the one God promised and sent, the one who bore our sins, the one who is the fulfillment of all God's word and promises, then we have life. And this seeing is something both the very young and the very old, and the blind, and the prisoner with nothing but four bare walls can see. These eyes of faith were given you in Baptism, when (to use the words of St. Paul again): when ***God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.*** So in the crucifixion, we see God become as we are - dead! - so that in the resurrection, we see that we become as God is - alive! By grace.

And by grace, our loving Father continues to give us life. Speaking to and teaching Israel in the wilderness, and speaking to and teaching us here. Forgiving them and feeding them, even as we receive His forgiveness and the Body and Blood of Jesus here as our food on the way. **And mercying us.** Even when that mercy takes the form of fiery serpents. A loving Father will do no less, if He truly loves you.

And that's why our church is arranged the way it is. This is no accident. But look: the Font front and center, the Absolution takes place at the Font, front and center, the Altar front and center, and the crucifix front and center. So that when you come here, with your sins, with your doubts, with your fears, with your wrong thinking and rebellion, what do you see? **All these places, all these signs of the words and promises of God! Modern-day bronze serpents,** that you *fix your eyes on Jesus* (Gradual); that looking upon these things, and remembering the words and promises of God, or Christ crucified, attached to each one of these things, **you are forgiven and saved, by grace through faith.**

And this salvation, Paul goes on to say, ***is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*** This is not your doing; you are just here to receive the gift of God. His *Divine Service* of you, for you. Which doesn't mean you don't do anything! You do! Just not here. Here you receive. But when you leave this place, you begin to do. To do those things, to live that life, God has raised you to. **For,** Paul says, ***we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*** Good works, which are God works.

And what are those works, which God has created for you to walk in? It is to be a godly

father or mother. A faithful husband or wife. An obedient child. A diligent worker. A merciful friend or neighbor. A gracious forgiver. A protector of life. A defender of property. An advocate for the helpless. A lifter of the lowly. A praiser of the good. A fighter of evil. A visitor of the lonely. A welcomer of the outcast. A proclaimer of the truth. A man or woman, boy or girl, of prayer. And much more. What else would you add to this list? All this now, too, is the DNA in you. In you, made new, given new life, in Christ. To live in the light of Christ and to shine the light of His mercy and love into all the world.

It's not easy to live such a life. You will struggle. Your old DNA, your old Adam, fighting against your new DNA, your new Christ-man. The world not liking what you're doing - either because it exposes them and what they're doing or not doing, or because they call good evil and evil good. And satan will be sure to rise up to either persecute you into submission, or tempt you to take it easy and not worry about such things. You don't need to do them! Someone else will. Take care of yourself. Do what you want. And then also along the way, maybe God will even send some merciful serpents to you.

So knowing that, *what's a soul to do?* Well, we've been singing it all this Lenten season, and it's what all the Scriptures are about today: *fix your eyes on Jesus*. Fix your eyes on His cross. Fix your ears on His Absolution. Fix your mouths to receive His Body and Blood. And fix your hearts to receive His love. And know that long before you fixed your eyes, ears, mouths, hearts, and minds on any of this, **He fixed His love on you**. For **God so loved the world, that he** [promised, and then] **gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life**. *Eternal life*. The gift of a merciful God *for you*.

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 faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.