

Prayer for Illumination

Gracious God,

May your messages and preaching come to us through your Holy Spirit's power, so that our faith might not rest on the statement of words by our pastor, but upon Your power and presence. Help us never to depend upon our own might or power, but always upon Your Spirit.

May You, the God of all hope, fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in you, and in your holy Son, the Lord Jesus, Messiah of all people. Amen.

Fiery Snakes
Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-21
David Spalding

Have you ever had a period of time when you just couldn't stand it anymore? Something or someone had caused you pain or suffering and it seemed to last forever. Maybe it was a nagging boss or an injury or maybe it was just something that was completely irritating. At some point you hit your breaking point and it made you scream out with sheer utterance of complaint and disgruntlement. You know, I am kind of there right now. I am so tired of covid19! The reality is that the year is over, we turned into 2021. It isn't covid20. Even the election is over and there is a different politician in the White House. I was told that was going to be the end of covid19. But it is still here, the virus wasn't under the control of a single person that could flip the switch and make it go away. There are still people getting sick and some (thankfully a much smaller percentage) that are dying. The elderly feel trapped and there continues to be strife between mask wearers and non-mask wearers. I watch people who have to make tough decisions and see the stress caused by the pressures from being in the middle between those who want to open everything up and those who want extreme caution. I feel for these people, because I used to be in that position as a high school principal. The difficulties of the economy versus safety is

massive. And it is all caused by this electron microscopic virus named covid19. I am tired. I want to open my Bible to every Psalm of lament and cry out:

¹My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?

²My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.^[b] (Pslam 22)

Does anyone else feel like that right now...or have you felt that way in the past?

In today's Old Testament reading, we find the nation of Israel on their trek from Egypt, where they were slaves to Pharoah for about 400 years, and now they are heading to the Promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey. The Israelites have been at this for a while. In fact, our covid19 problem only represents 2.5 percent of the time that they had spent on their journey. Yesterday marks the one-year anniversary that the governor shut down schools, businesses, government agencies. Can you imagine 39 more years of covid19 protocol. If we placed ourselves in the Israelites shoes, can you imagine the anguish of watching all of your relatives greater than the age of 20 dying? If we look at this church only those under the age of 19 would have the opportunity to walk into the Promised land. At this

point, two of their top leaders had passed away, Aaron, the chief priest and Miriam, Moses's sister. Except for Joshua and Caleb, the brave and God confident spies, every single adult in the generation died before entering the promised land. After just winning a huge battle with the Canaanites, the Edomites are now standing in the way of the Promised Land, so they are forced to go around this country. And all they have to eat is manna and quail.

Can you imagine, all the grocery stores and restaurants being closed for 39 more years. The only thing left to eat is now a wafer of manna with the sweet taste of honey and some quail. For forty years, the only thing to eat is manna and quail. At what point do you see yourself falling to the ground and crying out, I can't stand it anymore. Where is this Promised Land? How can it be promised if we never get to it?

The Israelites had had it. It was time for a confrontation. It was time to march up to the Tabernacle and let Moses and God know that they were fed up with the trip and the poor eats! It was time for the complaint to be made and the rights to be wronged, after all, the Israelites could be back in Egypt in slavery where they "had meat to eat! (They) remember(ed) the fish (they) ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks,

the onions, and the garlic” (Numbers 11:5). Oh, the garlic...I love garlic, how could I live without the garlic.

By the way, this is the second time the Israelites complained to Moses and the Lord about the food as they remembered the garlic. The first time they received the gift of quail, however, they were also disciplined with a plague.

So, the Israelites are headed up to the Tabernacle, with complaints in hand. “There is no bread. There is no water! And we detest this miserable food.” A little side note, the Israelites always had water, God even sweetened it, by having Moses throw a stick in the water. And they had food. Manna from Heaven and quail every night. The Israelites were cared for. They had God leading them with a cloud by day and fire by night. This was not a nation that was actually in turmoil. This was a nation that was completely and wholly cared for. They were not lacking, nor were they threatened by anyone. In fact, God completely defended the nation of Israel throughout the forty years of travel.

But the people weren't satisfied. And in their anger, they let Moses and God have it. Now, as I said a moment ago, when the nation of Israel confronts God with complaints that reveal their lack of trust in His ability to provide, it is a sin. And sin, at this time, was corrected with discipline. This

time, the discipline was in the form of venomous snakes. The Hebrew translation is actually fiery snakes. The bite of the snakes caused a massive burning sensation and the snakes may have been bright red in color. Like the plague before, many of the Israelites died. You might be saying to yourselves, “this isn’t the God I know or have been trained to know. God doesn’t punish those he loves.” You are correct, God doesn’t punish, but he disciplines. Just as a child must be raised with discipline to ensure that they are safe, so to, did God need to discipline the children of Israel to keep them from hurting themselves through future sinful acts. The plague and the fiery snakes were means of discipline created to bring the Israelites back into focus, a focus on the Lord.

According to the scripture the people of Israel responded appropriately to this discipline and they repented. They recognized their sin and went to Moses to confess. They said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.”

I have to admit, this is the point where the story gets weird to me. The Lord tells Moses to make a snake of bronze and put it on a pole. Have the people look at it and they would live. The Lord didn’t take away the snakes and the snakes are still biting the Israelites. The Lord didn’t provide a

potion, antidote or salve. He told Moses to have them look at the snake on the pole and they would be healed. Again, I don't get it.

I want to let you in on a secret at this point, when I don't understand something in one section of the Bible, I try to find other stories that align with the idea, so I can gain some understanding.

Here's an example: In II Kings 5, there was an officer, whose name was Naaman, serving the King of Syria who just happened to have leprosy. The Lord told Elisha to have Naaman dunk himself in the River Jordan seven times and he would be healed. By the way, Elisha didn't even open the door to tell him this. I think my reaction would like Naaman's, "that seems absurd, I have bathed many times, I'm not going to be healed by the muddy waters of the River Jordan." Naaman went away mad. Luckily, he had a servant that said, hey, if the prophet would have told you to do something miraculous, would you have done that. Why not try the simple act and follow his instructions to "wash and be clean." In the end, Naaman dipped in the River Jordan seven times and was clean, "with flesh like that of a little child."

Or you can look at some of the way that Jesus healed people. Jesus healed the blind man by mixing spit with dirt. He healed the several crippled

men by simply stating, get up and go. Jesus even healed the bleeding woman through her touch of his garment...Jesus was just walking by.

Here's the bottom line with the snake. The healing process for a snake bite for the Israelites does not make sense. If I was bitten by a venomous snake, why would I look a bronze snake placed on top of a stick to heal me. It does not make sense. I would be cutting it open begging someone to suck the venom out of it, not running to the stick with a snake on it.

But that's the point. Looking at a snake really won't heal you! Gaining an understanding that we need to recognize our sin and repent from it allows the Father to complete the healing process. With the snake on a stick, the Israelites were forced to confront the source of their trouble, which they truly brought upon themselves. Now the Israelites weren't free from sin and the snakes were still present, as the snakes are still present today.

However, just as the Israelites, when we turn away from the snake on the ground and look up, God heals.

At this point we need to turn our focus away from the Israelite nation and explain how this truly affects us today. In today's Gospel reading, a Pharisee named Nicodemus came to question Jesus. Nicodemus was different than a lot of the Pharisees who sought to kill Jesus. He was

coming to Jesus to learn, which is noted a little earlier in the chapter when he called him Rabbi in verse 2. In addition, Nicodemus speaks positively of Jesus in chapter 19 and actually helps Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus and anointing Christ's body. But on this night, Nicodemus is not understanding the teaching of Jesus. So, Jesus points back to something he will understand, a statement that was present in the Torah, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15).

When we consider the bronze snake that Moses created and stuck up on a stick to save the Israelite Nation from fiery snakes, it served as a symbol of the way that Jesus, our Savior, would be lifted up and placed on a cross to save all people from their sins. Looking up to Jesus on the cross and accepting His gift of salvation, saves us from the ultimate fiery snake, the bite of Satan. Jesus not only heals us, but through His gift, he saves us from our own sin and eternal death.

You might be wondering how the connection is being made between the bronze serpent on a stick and Jesus being placed on the cross. To understand this, there are two things you need to know. First, the serpent represents evil. This can be seen both in the Genesis (3:1-5) during the

Apple eating incident and in Revelations where the Apostle John actually names the devil as the “ancient serpent.” Therefore, the serpent being placed on the stick represents our evil sins being placed on the cross with Jesus.

The second tidbit is the use of bronze in making the serpent. Bronze is a metal that is often associated with judgement in the Bible. This is due to the methods used to make bronze out of the various metals. Back when I was a chemistry teacher, we discussed ways to make metals stronger by making alloys. Since copper, by itself, lacks strength as it is very malleable (it bends), it is blended with other metals to strengthen it. This is called “firing.” So bronze was noted as going through the fires of judgment.

Now if we put these two ideas together, we begin to recognize the point that Jesus was making. By pointing to the serpent on the stick, Jesus helps us recognize that he took our evil sins up on the cross with him to be judged once and for all.

The bottom line for the Israelites is that faith in God, saved them from being killed by the venom after being bitten by the fiery snakes. In the same way, it is our belief in Jesus that saves us from the venom that infiltrates our souls when we sin. Just as the Israelites had to look up at the bronze

serpent and believe that God would heal them, so we must look up to Jesus on that cross and believe that he will heal us.

This is faith.

The concept of faith is very important and I believe that there is a difference between a flippant statement that many people make concerning their belief in Jesus and actually placing their faith in him.

Here's a story to help you understand the difference. In 1859, there was a man named Charles Blondin who was a French tightrope walker. On June 30, 1859, Blondin performed a stunning feat as he walked over Niagara Falls on a tightrope. The walk was over 3 football fields long, in fact it spanned 1,100 feet from the American to the Canadian side. Onlookers seemed to enjoy the act, as they would come from everywhere to watch Blondin walk on the cable from one side to the other. But as things go, completing the walk became boring, so he jazzed up the performance by completing the walk while blindfolded, then on stilts, he even sat down over the falls in the middle of the walk to cook an omelet (and he ate it too). By the way, he brought out a wood burning stove to cook the omelet on. The crowds loved the great show. One day, Charles Blondin walked across the rope with a wheelbarrow full of rocks. When he got to the other side, the crowd

responded with an ovation. They were joyous in their celebration. Then Blondin quieted the crowd and asked a question, “who thinks that I can go back across with a man in the wheelbarrow?” The crowd showed their faith in his ability to take a man back across the falls in the wheelbarrow as he walked on that cable stretching 1100 feet. But then, Blondin dumped the rocks out of the wheel barrow and quieted the crowds once again and asked the question, “who wants to be my volunteer.” The crowds’ faith in Blondin was now put to the test and they fell silent. No one jumped into the wheelbarrow to cross the falls.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Do you believe...are you in Jesus’ wheelbarrow 160 feet above the falls? Or are you standing in the crowds simply shouting “I believe?”

Like the placement of a bronze snake on the stick doesn’t seem to make sense to cure a person of a snake bit, the placement of God’s son on the cross to take away my sins and yours, doesn’t make a lot of sense to me either. But it works, because focusing on Jesus causes us to turn away from this world, covid19 and everything else, and to focus on Him...our Savior Jesus Christ.

You know when we are rid of covid19, or maybe while we are enduring it, I truly hope that we can turn to the Lord with a different Psalm than the one I mentioned earlier. Maybe one like this:

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
Let the field exalt, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
Before the Lord; for he is coming,
For he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
And the peoples with his truth. (Psalm 96:11-13)

That will be a great day!

And all the Lord's people said: Amen..