

A Sermon Preached by
Fr. Edwin Smith for Lent 4, year B
March 8, 2009 at St. Thomas, Menasha

Our Old Testament lesson this morning tells of the Israelites confronting Moses on their way to the Red Sea. This is not the first time, nor the last, that they question his leading them out of slavery in Egypt. Remember how they railed against him because they were hungry – starving – in their trek to the Promised Land. God showered down manna upon them. They ate and were filled.

Well, here they are, again, railing against Moses. This time, they have grown tired of the manna. They want something else, something they perceive as better.

We are like that sometimes, are we not? God provides for our needs. But, we want something else, something we perceive as better.

The problem here is that the Israelites were not railing against Moses so much as they were against God and his provision for them. They are the ones referred to in the Psalm we just read, where the psalmist says, in verses 17 thru 20,

“Some were fools and took to rebellious ways,
they were afflicted because of their sins.
They abhorred all manner of food
and drew near to death’s door.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.
He sent forth his word and healed them
and saved them from the grave.

So, to get their attention, God sends venomous snakes among them, and many were bitten and died.

Now, what Scripture does not say is that, up to now, they had not been faced with venomous snakes. God had not let that happen before. I wonder how many of them thought about that right away. How they had been protected up to now?

So much of what God provides for us, we take for granted. It’s only when circumstances change we become aware of what we have been given.

The Israelites finally came to their senses – God has gotten their attention. So they asked Moses, the one against who they railed, to pray that the Lord would take the snakes away from them. Moses did just that, and the Lord said to him, “Make a snake and put it on a pole. When anyone is bitten can look at it and live.”

So Moses did as the Lord directed, and those who were bitten and looked upon the bronze snake lived.

That snake on a pole looked something like this. [Visual Aid]

Now, so that we can be clear about what happened, let me offer an explanation I read. “It was not the bronze snake that healed. So long as Moses lifted up the serpent, they believed on him who had commanded Moses to do so. It was God and their belief in him who healed them, not the bronze snake.”

But, of course, this story was passed down thru generations and the bronze snake became an idol, so that in the time of King Hezekiah, it had to be destroyed.

You know, we do that sometimes, too – make idols of things around us, even in church.

It is something of which we should beware.

Now, in our Gospel Lesson, Jesus refers back to this incident with Moses and the bronze serpent.

He is visited at night by the Pharisee, Nicodemus. I can't resist the temptation of sharing that this was the first episode of 'nick-at-night!'

Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee, he was a high level Pharisee – a member of the Sanhedrin -- so it was necessary for him to come under cover of darkness to speak with Jesus. And, he came to learn from Jesus -- to listen to him -- not to badger him as his fellow Pharisees often did.

And Jesus respected Nicodemus' curiosity by speaking clearly about who he was, how one can be born again, and how to achieve eternal life without the threat of condemnation.

The verses of John, chapter 3, are a very direct exposition of the good news in Christ Jesus. We tend to focus on John 3:16 as a simple summary, but the entire chapter should be read at one time. Unfortunately, our Gospel lesson begins at verse 14 and ends at verse 21.

The point is, when Jesus told Nicodemus that "just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the son of man must be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" – when Jesus said that, Nicodemus probably had a pretty good idea of what Jesus meant. He knew the story of Moses and the bronze snake. What he did not know at the time was what Jesus meant by being lifted up.

I would suggest to you that when Jesus was lifted high upon the cross, Nicodemus remembered their conversation, and his heart and eyes were opened. You will remember that it was the same Nicodemus who spoke up for Jesus when he was arrested and who brought spices to the tomb for his burial.

Now, the Israelites probably thought that Moses was slightly daft when he told lifted up the bronze serpent and told them what the Lord had spoken to him. Yet, many complied. When Jesus was lifted high on the cross, even his disciples did not understand what had happened.

But, you and I know. History has been kind to us in that regard.

The words of First Corinthians 1:20-25 come to mind.

"Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."

Just as those Israelites who had been bitten by the venomous snakes were healed by looking upon the bronze snake and believing in the one who had told Moses what to do, so we, who, as Paul says in our epistle, "were dead in our transgressions and sins," are made whole by believing in the Jesus who was lifted up on the cross.