



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“LOOKING FOR SIN’S VACCINE?”

Scripture Lessons: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, March 14, 2021
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John 3:14-21

As you can imagine, the oft referenced COVID vaccine and the vast majority of people’s desire to get it inspired this morning’s sermon title: “Looking for Sin’s Vaccine?” Though I can readily admit the obvious limitations of that title. Most notably, sin is not something for which we can be vaccinated. In fact, every one of us already has it, sin that is. In light of our Old Testament Lesson this morning, one could argue that we have already been snake-bitten, as it were with regard to sin, that the poisonous effects are already pumping through our veins and so what we are talking about is not as much a vaccine, as it is an antivenom, an actual cure! And, oh, how we desperately need it. The Bible tells us that the wages of sin are death, which is to say that sin, left untreated, is deadly 100% of the time.

Think about that for moment, Christ’s Church, we are blessed to be the bearers of this extraordinary news, that the most terminal ailment this side of heaven, life’s most deadly disease. There is a cure for it and heaven help us if we keep that news to ourselves.

This morning’s lectionary reading, the second reading of the lectionary, comes to us from John 3:14-21.

Let us continue to listen to the Word of the Lord! “And 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 everlasting life. ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those

who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'”

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Our daughter, Mary Caroline, and I enjoy watching shows about animals and oftentimes, we end up watching shows like the “World’s Deadliest” this or that. Not too long ago, we were watching a documentary on Netflix entitled, “72 Dangerous Animals in Latin America.” It was broken up into different episodes, and each episode had its own list of dangerous animals, and on nearly every episode somewhere among the ranking was...a snake. At the end of the season, all the top vote getters on the individual episodes would go up against one another to see which one in fact was “the deadliest animal” and, as fate would have it, the winner was a snake; the Fer-de-lance snake, to be precise.

Now, I don’t know about you, but I find it interesting that most people have probably never seen a poisonous snake, but they sure are afraid of them and, at a very basic level, for good reason, right? I mean, after all, a poisonous snake is poisonous. It has capacity to do us harm. Perhaps even kill us. I suppose there are a lot of things that additionally contribute to one’s fear and apprehension of snakes. Maybe deep in our bones, there is that certain latent survival instincts or maybe we just don’t like slithering things. Maybe we have heard one of the Bible’s very first stories.

In the opening chapters of the book of Genesis, we are presented with an image of a snake, a serpent and the serpent is not only crafty, the Bible tells us, but it is also serves as an instrument where by Satan tempts Adam and Eve. Now, Adam and Eve were undoubtedly held accountable for their actions, but so is the serpent. For, in Genesis 3:15, God says to the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers. He will strike your head and you will strike his heel.” There are, of course, a variety of other stories, or references to snakes, or serpents as the Bible typically refers to them. In fact, in upwards of 80 times, we will hear serpents referenced in the Scriptures.

For example, there is that one story that comes to us from Acts 28. The Apostle Paul had “gathered some wood together and was putting the bundle in the fire, and a viper had been driven out by the heat, and the Bible tells us it latched on his hand. And those who were there thought surely, he must be a murderer. He might have been excused from justice while on the boat, but it is catching up to him now. However, Paul shook off the creature into the fire and he suffered no harm. After a little while, the folks were expecting him to swell up and die. Nothing happened. They then presumed that well maybe he was right with God. In fact, they thought Paul might be a God.”

In this morning’s Old Testament Lesson, we find yet another Biblical story which includes snakes. The people of God, they are in the wilderness and they have grown impatient and they have spoken against God and against Moses. God sends poisonous snakes to dwell among the people, and many Israelites get bitten and many of them die. The people eventually came to Moses with penitent hearts and asked that the serpents be removed, but God in his sovereign majesty doesn’t remove the serpents. Instead, he adds one more. God tells Moses to go and make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live. And so happens here is, that the very symbol of the thing which has the power to kill the people, became by the power of God, the means by which they would be saved.

I have wondered the extent to which this story in the book of Numbers, may have served as a measure of inspiration for the psychologist, Carl Jung, who made certain assumptions about the role of serpents in people’s dreams. You see, for Jung, the person to have dreamt about a serpent meant that that person was in the process of healing. In other words, he perceived the image of a serpent to be a part of someone’s recovery. Our Old Testament Lesson this morning may have also been used to promote the emergence of the Greek god known as Asclepius, whose own rod was intertwined with a snake and whose particular role within the Greek Pantheon was that of healing and medicine. Or consider one of the predominant images for modern medicine, we know as, the two snakes woven around a pole/staff. Consider how it is again that symbol of destruction can also serve as a symbol for healing. Well, in so many ways, it goes right back to this story!

Now, to be clear, in our Old Testament Lesson, God doesn’t remove the pain or the sting of sin. God doesn’t remove the serpents but God did remove sin’s dreadful consequence. In other words, the people’s sin has happened. It will continue to happen, but we are still frail and fallen, but by turning to God, the effects of their sin are removed. They are, in a word, healed!

And, lest we forget, God is not inviting the people to turn to a bronze serpent. He is inviting them to turn to him. In fact, later when that serpent becomes a form of idolization for the people, it is no longer useful and it's going to be removed but, for the time being, God shows how a symbol for death can, in fact, be coopted by God to become a symbol for life!

Listen again to what Jesus says in this morning's New Testament Lesson, "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him will have eternal life!" Friends, this is the image that we have been given. The image of Jesus on a cross, and not unlike how the serpent functioned for the Israelites, the cross is also for us a symbol of pain and suffering and death. Make no mistake about it, in the cross we see evidence of consequences of our sin. In other words, it is our death upon which we look, but because Jesus bore, in his body, our sins on the cross, so that free from sins, we might now be in bolden to live for righteousness. It has now become our life upon which we look. But notice that none of this, is the result of our own doing? We are looking upon the glorious work of God.

We don't need trillions of dollars in research, to find a cure, as I said. Besides, we would not find a cure because, at the end of the day, we cannot atone for our own sins. We cannot make ourselves right with God. We need Christ to do that!

In our New Testament Lesson this morning, we were also introduced to a man named Nicodemus. He was the one who hearing this glad and glorious news, but there is a problem with Nicodemus. It's a similar problem that we have as well.

And lest someone think I am being too hard on Nicodemus, let me just assure you something of the character development of Nicodemus, as set forth in the Gospel of John. I know that here in chapter 3, Nicodemus is shown to have developed more than just a passing interest in Jesus, perhaps even a saving faith.

I know that late, in John 7, and upon Jesus' healing of the blind man, that it is going to be Nicodemus who spoke up in the midst of Sanhedrin to come to Jesus' defense. I know near the very end of John's Gospel, in chapter 19 it's Nicodemus who steps up yet again, he assists Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of Jesus. But I also know that Nicodemus, he operates in the shadows and in this story, he quite literally comes to Jesus under the cloak of darkness, and when we take into account John's literary design and how darkness and light are so intentionally contrasted with one another. It cannot be lost on us that what is taking place, to put it plainly, it is not happening in the light! And knowing this, Jesus says, "And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and the people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not

come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.” That is an apt description of human condition, is it not? From the beginning, and upon sin’s grand entrance onto the world’s stage, we didn’t want to be exposed. Adam and Eve, they covered themselves. They tried to hide themselves from God. And this human inclination of ours, it never stops. Through judges and prophets and kings, God tells us the way our feet should go. God reveals the divine heart and mind in the commandments and the covenants of God and in these ways and so many others, we learn the ways of God. We learn the heart and mind of Christ. And praise be to God, we do make improvements from time to time. We may even “reform” ourselves for a little while, but eventually revert back to our sinful ways!

But here’s the miracle. Our sin, it does not escape God’s attention and I don’t say that to be scary! I say that as to be reassuring! I say that to remind us of the fact that only if God didn’t know we were, would he have refrained from sending his Son. Ah, to know the greatness of God’s love, we need look no further than the cross. For in the cross, that once ancient prophecy, now rings true. For the serpent’s head is undoubtedly struck because Jesus’ work on the cross becomes the principle victory over the powers of sin and death. God tells us in the Bible that, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away and see, everything has become new!” Now, this doesn’t mean that sin never happened. It doesn’t mean that we are no longer impacted by our choices of our past, but we are no longer judged by our sin. Sin does not have the last word!

I was looking at a friend’s Facebook post the other day and he made the comment, “When Satan reminds you of your past, remind him of his future.” And to be certain, about that one we call Satan, the one who is also called a liar and a deceiver. The Bible makes it clear that his doom is sure! Ah, but as for us and for the world, there is redemption, even for the serpents. For Isaiah tells us that, “The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put it’s hand on the adder’s den.” This is what light of God does to the world! It means that God has the definitive and last word! It means that God, who declared His creation good will make it so. It means that the God who calls us His children, chosen and beloved, has it so! And as God’s children, we are invited to live, but not in the shadows, but to live in the light! Jesus tells us that “those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

If there were a show entitled “The World’s Deadliest Affliction,” at the very top of the list would not be cancer. It would not be Alzheimer’s or ALS or any other disease as grave as it may be. At the top of that list would be sin, because apart

from Jesus Christ, there is no cure! But when we behold the cross of Jesus, and when we, by grace through faith, profess Jesus to be the Son of God, we effectively testify to the forgiveness and that the new life that God gives!

Ah, to be certain, in this snake-bitten world in which we live, there is no greater news for us to share! But we cannot share it if we skirt around the edges, the periphery, if we operate in the shadows of life, at convenient times for us. We must come to the light. We must be out in the open, as it were, bold and yet humble. For again, that which we profess is not our doing. It is the wondrous work of God, a righteous work which is declared that sin will not ultimately prevail and certainly not prevail over a blessed child of God!

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

*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.