

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

A while back I shared that I have been an amateur herpetologist for many years now, with a particular fascination for venomous reptiles. One year when we lived in Rochester, and I was spending a fair amount of time traipsing through the hills and ravines of southeastern Minnesota, looking for rattlesnakes, my wife thought she should get me a snake bite kit, one that was small enough that I could carry it in my pocket. Back in those days, such a kit came with a sharp, razor-like blade, a band suitable for tourniquets, and part of the kit doubled as a suction device, after all, if you are bit in the foot or lower leg, most of us would not be able to do much about it if we were on our own. This kind of kit is no longer suggested by experts, as treating oneself in the field often does more harm than good.

As you can imagine, our first lesson this morning, reminded me of the days when I would go wandering about, looking for snakes. For a moment or two I was diverted from the real message of the text into wondering what kind of snake it might have been that was doing all the damage. Kind of like the Israelites, diverted from the matters at hand. But then I started pondering the story as you heard it read.

So can you relate to the Israelites as they wander in the wilderness? First they cry out in their captivity, their bondage in Egypt. We can understand complaints there, suffering, starvation, hard labor, but now they are not satisfied with their freedom either. Complain about this, complain about that so God sends fire. Fires burn parts of their camp, complain to Moses, he prays, the fires stop. Complain about God to the point where you cast your own in the form of a golden calf. Complain all the way to the point where God is going to prolong the wilderness experience to 40 years. Complain that there is no water, water is provided from a rock. All this time they have been complaining to Moses, not directly to God. Now they complain directly to God, "we have no food, we do not like this food!" There are times when I read the book of Numbers when I think it is a story illustrating petulance! The people want to be free, but they want it on their terms. Complain, complain, complain! Snakes are rampant, the people tell Moses to pray that God will take the snakes away from them. God answers prayer but he does it in an unexpected way. Cast a serpent of bronze, put it on a pole, and when bitten, look at it and live.

Now we can probably all relate to this story to one degree or another, not the literal wandering in the wilderness, but perhaps wandering in a wilderness of our own creation. We might not be able to relate to all the complaints of the people, but I suspect we have each done our fair share, or more, of complaining. We want to be self-reliant and free but we want it on our terms. Kind of like me searching for snakes, ill-equipped with my snake bite kit, the potential to cause myself more damage than the snake had I been bitten. We want it our way meaning we want God to do it our way.

As I mentioned, we are in a wilderness too, or many of us have been. A wilderness of

our own creation, a wilderness of sin and darkness. A wilderness of inevitable destruction as a result of that sin. And Jesus tells us that 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. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." So let me ask you: what do you see when you look upon the cross? Is it just a couple pieces of wood fastened together?

There are those who still dwell in the wilderness, in the darkness, those who do not believe in the name of the only Son of God. The serpents of disobedience, of sin, send fiery desires our way, we end up entangled, diverted, acting in anger and unhealthy competition. Our goals are set in the short term. Now think for a moment about focusing on the Son of Man, lifted up, exalted, how we are forgiven, healed, saved. We who were dead have been brought to life by the grace of God.

What do you see when you look at the cross? Do you see Christ crucified for you? The cross of the crucifixion is image of the truth about us. The truth is Christ was crucified as a result of our sin, of our going our own way. What do you see when you look at the cross? Do you see the reality of our sin? But then do you see the path that lies in its shadow, the path toward a life lived in and through Christ Jesus?

Had I been bitten while out looking at snakes, my snakebite kit would not have brought about healing. Someone wandering in the Exodus would have been healed albeit temporarily, by looking at a snake on a pole. So again I ask you, what do you see when you look at the cross? Do you see your healing, healing for all eternity, upon it?

My friends, our healing comes from the deepest pain, the pain Jesus endured on the cross for you and me. Out of mercy God has sent the light that heals, that illumines what must be seen, Christ exalted and lifted up. By grace you have been saved, raised up with Christ, by grace through faith, the gift of God, that we may not boast about our own efforts. Instead we boast about what God has done, the life created in Christ Jesus for good works, the very way of life that God prepared for us. It is our calling, my friends, to bring that grace, that light, to those who still live in the darkness, to those who are still beset by the serpents of wrath and sin. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that all who believe in him may not perish, but have eternal life.

AMEN