

Did you notice the title for today's sermon? It's "Snakebit!"

Speaking of snakes:

Do you know which snakes are best at mathematics? **Adders.**

(And) What's the best unit of measurement for measuring snakes?

Inches, because they don't have any feet.

What do you call a snake who works for the government?

A civil serpent.

What do you call a snake that bakes? **A pie-thon.**

Why don't snakes drink coffee? **It makes them viperactive.**

What did the snake give to his wife? **A goodnight hiss.**

What do snakes do when they get angry? **They throw hissy fits.**

(Depending on reactions... 1=positive; 2= negative)

1) So, I guess these jokes were kind of funny, maybe even hisssssterical? Thank you! And now it's time to get sssserious.

2) Apparently, these jokes weren't very funny and you could even say **far** from hisssssterical. At any rate it's time to get sssserious.

Like I said, the title for this sermon that's based on our Old

Testament reading is "Snakebit!" That expression can mean a couple of different things. It can mean just what the word says—that someone has literally been bitten by a snake, and if that ever happens to you by the

way, "Don't keep it a secret!" Get help immediately! But the word "snakebit" can also mean that someone has had what we might call a run of bad luck. They're unlucky; prone to misfortune; snakebit.

If we had been with the Israelites who are described in today's Old Testament Reading, they would probably have told us that they were "snakebit" in **both** ways that I just described. First of all, they would have said they were "out of luck." They would have blamed both God and Moses for leading them out of Egypt into a desert wilderness and then abandoning them.

For over 400 years, the Israelites had been in Egypt. While there, 20 generations had died in slavery. Once freed from slavery, another generation had, for the most part, died on the journey to get to this point where our text picks up. And now, the Israelites were oh-so-close to entering and possessing the Promised Land of Canaan for which they had hoped for so long. But the king of Edom seemed to clobber that plan. He had just told them forcefully, "No! You can't take a short cut through our land on the way to your new homeland. We don't trust you. Go around!"

Well, going around Edom would add weeks if not months to their journey in the desert. So, frustrated and fed-up, the Israelites resorted to a tactic with which each of us is also all too familiar. In their disappointment that God did not make things go according to their plan, they became impatient with Him. Their impatience turned into complaining, and their complaining turned into self-pity. And, sadly, all of *that* then turned into rebellion.

Of course, it doesn't take a seasoned professor of the Bible to know that God **does** *not* and **will** *not* tolerate rebellion. We know from our reading of God's Word that things don't go well for those who deliberately refuse to obey the Lord. Sometimes, He acts right away, and sometimes He bides His time, but He *always* addresses the sin. You can count on that. In this case, God moved **quickly**. Immediately, He sent poisonous snakes to punish the people for their open rebellion. So, sure enough, the Israelites were snake-bitten in the other way too, and many of them died.

By sending the snakes, God showed three things to the Israelites. First, He showed them His just anger with them for their rejection of His

grace and protection that He'd given to them for 40 years and even before that. Second, He wanted to show them (again!) that their own sinfully defiant action was the direct cause of their problems. After all, it was their rebellion 40 years earlier that caused them to have to wander in the desert and not be able to go immediately from Egypt into the Promised Land. And third, God brought the deadly snakes among them in an effort to show them their sin and lead them to repentance. He wanted to show them (again!) that their rebellion, their rejection of Him, would lead to **His** rejection of **them** and their subsequent death apart from Him in hell.

By now, you might be thinking, "Well, that's a good story, Pastor, but how does that affect me . . . in my life . . . right now? After all, that was thousands of years ago. What does it have to do with **me, today?**"

The truth is, we can all take a lesson from our spiritual forefathers in this story. We, too, often become impatient with God's timing, don't we? We, too, want to take matters into our own hands without first seeking God's direction through His Word and going to Him in prayer. And we, too—even if we do seek God's direction for our lives—often find

ourselves ignoring His promises and striking out on our own. **Here** is exactly the point where **we** enter this story. Just like the Israelites, we, too, go against God and His direction and leadership for our lives. For instance, if someone we know has been saying false and hurtful things about us behind our back we may choose to completely ignore God's 8th commandment and say "Hey! Two can play at that game. If they're going to tear me down, I'm going to do it right back! " Or when God seems to be ignoring us when we pray for help when the money gets tight, we become impatient with God and decide it's time to cut some corners on the tax return or take things that don't belong to us to help make up for our lack of resources, rather than trusting that God will provide those resources in His own good timing and in His own good way. The list of ways we defy God, just like the Israelites did, goes on and on. We really aren't all that different from them, after all. We too, tend to go astray from the Lord.

In the 1970s, there was a rock band called Fleetwood Mac. One of their biggest hits was "Go Your Own Way." I seriously doubt that they had any biblical concepts in mind when they recorded it, but that title, "Go

Your Own Way,” describes our human condition perfectly. It describes the honest truth about our desire to “go our own way” rather than follow God’s clear direction and fully trust His promises.

The Israelites in the wilderness had rejected God and had determined to go *their* own way—apart from God. And you . . . me . . . well, it’s our song too, isn’t it? We are— aren’t we?—constantly rebelling against God and His call to trust in Him above all else. That’s why we are prone to worry and to have doubts about Him.

I mentioned earlier that God had sent the snakes among the Israelites in order to bring them back to repentance and faith in Him. That was His ultimate goal, as it always is. God’s goal wasn’t to condemn them, but to save them. And His love for them was behind it all! It’s incredible, when you think about it. He *continued* to love them in spite of their resistance to Him and His loving will for their lives.

To this day, God continues to use adversity and the different problems that we have to draw us back to Him or keep us by His side. And, by the way, many, not all, but many of those problems we actually

bring upon ourselves—just like the Israelites did. But God **will** see us through them.

As we saw, God had a solution for the disobedient Israelites. They who were dying from the snakebites were to look at the bronze snake that He had directed Moses to lift up on a pole. Those who looked at the bronze snake, not as a god, but as a symbol of God's promise and protection, were saved. Those who were dying were given life! Their faith in God—that He still loved them in spite of their rebellion—healed them and saved their lives.

Out of that same love, God has also provided a solution for you and me and the rebellion each of us has against Him. God sent Jesus into the world to be lifted up onto a different kind of pole. In today's Gospel, John recorded Jesus' own words regarding what would happen to Him: "And 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" (Jn 3:14–15).

Jesus was lifted up on a cross to suffer the punishment, the condemnation, the eternal death that each of us should have received for

our sinful defiance of God. We, who were “snakebit” with sin—our **own** sin—and were dying from those wounds, are now saved from an eternal death in hell just as surely as the Israelites were saved from death in the desert. So ‘there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,’ for sins of gossiping, stealing, not trusting Him, and every other sin - forgiven!

For the Israelites, the simple act of a snake-bitten person looking at a bronze snake raised up on a pole caused them to be healed and live. They would live and enter into the Promised Land, where they would be safe from the Egyptians, who saw their worth only as slaves. In the same way—but on a far greater scale **and** with **eternal** implications—the simple act of looking up in faith at Jesus raised up on the “pole” of the cross for our sins causes us who are dying from sin to be healed **and live**. In Jesus, through faith in His promise to forgive us of all our sins through His death and resurrection, we are healed and will live with Him forever in the promised land of **heaven**! Our Father in heaven sees us as valuable and precious—worthy of His own dear Son’s life.

Fortunately, the Israelites in the desert repented of their sins and received forgiveness and life. We, too, recognize our sin—our sinful desire to “go our own way.” Led by the Holy Spirit, we repent and daily return to our baptismal faith, where we live in God’s forgiveness and live out the new forgiven life, rejoicing to receive His mercy through God’s means of grace; His Word and His Sacraments.

Two things we’ve seen today go beyond human reason: the bronze serpent lifted up in the desert and Jesus’ being lifted up on His blessed cross. **Neither** action makes sense. But that’s the whole point! Jesus forgives your sins and gives you eternal life in heaven solely by grace through faith in the unlikely, improbable, but totally **true** fact of His death on the cross in your place! God would have us look at Him alone for life and salvation. There, by His grace in the cross of Christ, God saves His snakebit people, you, and me. There is a Redeemer, Jesus, God’s own Son.

Amen