

Lent 4B – March 22, 2009
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ
Numbers 21:4-9 John 3:14-21

Does anyone remember any home remedies that were passed down through your family? A favorite cure from your grandmother, or some icky-smelling potion your aunt used to cook up, guaranteed to cure whatever ailed you?

Menthol always seemed to be my father's favorite cure. Specifically, Vicks Vapor Rub. It could cure anything. If I had a stiff, sore neck muscle, he'd make me rub Vapor Rub on it and wear an old wool sock around my neck to keep the heat in. A sore throat called for the same treatment. A stuffy head? Dissolve Vapor Rub in hot water, and lean over the steaming pot with a towel over my head, breathing in the warm steam. (He gave me this advice yet again just last month when I had that horrible virus.) A sunburn? Not Vapor Rub this time, but Noxema cream. Which, by the way, also contains a healthy dose of menthol.

I'm sure there are a whole lot of strange home remedies out there, probably more bizarre than my father's menthol treatments. But surely there are few as strange as the remedy we read about in today's scripture reading from Numbers.

This story takes place during the forty years Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness. During this forty years the Israelites had proven themselves to be terrific whiners. They whined and complained to Moses about everything. But this time they'd crossed over a line. Not only had they complained against Moses, but for the first time they complained against God.

And in a continuation of this pattern that we see repeat itself over and over again in the Old Testament, when the people sin against God, there is punishment. God punished the people by sending venomous snakes into their camp. And, as the pattern always shows, the people repent of their sin. They beg Moses to pray that God would remove the snakes.

God responds the same way He always does when the people repent of their sin – he sends them salvation. But instead of removing the snakes, God instructs Moses to give them this very strange remedy – a bronze snake, mounted on a pole and lifted high for everyone to see. Anyone who was bitten by a snake could look at the bronze snake and live. The cure for the disease was a representation of the same thing that had made them ill.

Apparently there is precedent for this kind of cure. Not only are there stories outside of the Bible of a representation of a thing curing the illness, but there's another similar story in the Bible. In I Samuel 5 and 6 when the Philistines capture the Ark, they are, we're told, stricken with a plague of tumors. Their physicians and magicians tell the Philistine leaders that in order to be cured of this illness they must make golden tumors, and send them back to the Israelites, along with the Ark. We're not explicitly told that the plague of tumors is cured, but by the same token, the plague is never mentioned again, so we assume that the cure worked. Yet another bizarre cure.

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Now, sometimes it can be hard for a preacher to connect the dots between the Old Testament reading and the assigned Gospel reading for the day. Let me explain why...

We follow a series of assigned readings called the Revised Common Lectionary, or RCL for short. It's a three-year cycle of reading, designated as Year A, Year B, and Year C. In Year A the Gospel texts are primarily from Matthew; in Year B they're taken from Mark; and in Year C, they come from the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel of John is sprinkled throughout the three-year cycle. Throughout each year we travel through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ.

For each assigned Gospel reading the Old Testament is selected to link thematically with it, as is the Psalm. The Second Lesson, the Epistle or reading from one of the letters of the New Testament, is usually a semi-continuous reading from that book. It's really convenient for a preacher when the Epistle reading goes along with the Gospel and Old Testament lessons, but it doesn't always work out that way.

And, in fact, it can sometimes be really hard for us preachers to connect the dots between the Old Testament reading and the Gospel reading and still do justice to the Old Testament reading. While the theme may fit, it's not always possible to treat the Old Testament reading in its original context, and with the meaning that it had for the people who originally heard it, without really wrapping the text around the axle.

Today's pairing of Old Testament and Gospel readings is not like that, though. Jesus explicitly referred to today's reading from Numbers when he said, "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."¹

Today's story from the Gospel of Mark is taken from a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee. Jesus wanted to explain God's plan of salvation to Nicodemus. And when he compared himself to the bronze serpent, he was specifically referring to his own crucifixion.

In the same way that the remedy for snakebite was once a bronze snake lifted up on a pole, the remedy for sin and death is the death of God's son lifted up on a cross. Jesus taking the sin of the world upon himself on the cross. As the Apostle Paul said, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."²

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There is an important lesson from the Old Testament for us gathered here today. Remember I mentioned earlier that there is this seemingly endless pattern of the people rebelling against God – sinning – and suffering the punishment of their rebellion? It's so easy for us to read those stories and point an accusatory finger, saying something like, "Look at how bad they were!" or, "Why don't they ever learn?!" But I'm here to tell you – our sins may be different from theirs, but our rebelliousness continues.

We heard last week about the Ten Commandments. Break one of those, and the sin is obvious, right? No stealing, no killing, no taking the Lord's name in vain.

But as we learned from Luther's explanation of the Ten Commandments, maybe it's not so obvious. Not only are we to avoid speaking ill of our neighbor, for instance, but we are to speak well of them and do whatever we can to help them. Not only are we to avoid killing our neighbor, but we are also to help our neighbor to thrive. Just as much as committing one of those acts is a sin, *failure to act* to prevent harm to a neighbor can be sin, too. And all sin is, at its root, rebellion against God. Perhaps, in a very basic way, we are not so different than the people of the Old Testament after all.

And yet, in our sinful state, God has already responded to those who would repent and turn toward Him with a contrite heart. God has already provided the *ultimate* cure for our sin – Jesus, hanging on a cross, dying for our sins, and rising to live eternally as Lord of all.

This is the cure we receive for our sin-sick state when we are baptized. Here's what our baptismal service says:

In baptism our gracious heavenly Father frees us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are born children of a fallen humanity; by water and the Holy Spirit we are reborn children of God and made members of the church, the body of Christ. Living with Christ and in the communion of saints, we grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God.³

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Today we will celebrate with several people who have chosen to formalize their relationship with us and become members of our congregation. It is my prayer for them that as fellow workers with us in the kingdom of God they would continue to grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God. And it is my prayer for our community that we would, as our mission statement says, provide for them “a safe place to grow in faith and community to serve the Lord as people created by God, saved by Christ and nurtured by the Holy Spirit.”⁴

Amen.

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¹ John 3:14-15

² II Corinthians 5:21

³ Evangelical Lutheran Worship, 227.

⁴ APLC Mission Statement: “Abiding Peace Lutheran Church makes Christ known by welcoming everyone to a safe place to grow in faith and community to serve the Lord as people created by God, saved by Christ and nurtured by the Holy Spirit.”