

**Sermon for Trinity, Manilla, 4th Sunday of Lent + March 9, 2024 + Pastor Daniel Vogel,
Visiting Pastor**

+++Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!
Amen

Dear Friends in Christ; The title of our message for today is “**A Bronze What....?**” based on our Old Testament lesson from Numbers 21:8: **“And the Lord said to Moses: Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole and everyone who is bitten when he sees it, will live.”**

When we think of the religions of the world we see all manner of idols, statues and figures, all believed to have supernatural power. Today, in this Lenten season we will study about a Bronze Serpent, one of the most interesting stories in the Bible. We will study about a bronze serpent that led our ancient spiritual ancestors who believed in the True God, not to trust in the make-believe gods of pagan cultures. So why a serpent, a snake? Why a fiery bronze one?

THE SERPENT TAKES US BACK TO THE BEGINNING OF THE BIBLE STORY OF MANKIND. We first meet a serpent who was really a very special snake in Genesis 3. He talked, and he came to Eve and tempted her to disobey God’s law. The Garden of Eden was a perfect paradise and there was no fear of snakes or anything else so Eve was not at all suspicious of this talking creature. But we know that this wasn’t just a serpent/snake, it was really the spiritual creature who we know as Satan, as the Devil. He was a powerful angel created by God who rebelled and became jealous of his creator. So he took the form of a snake to deceive and to attack our first spiritual parents, Adam and Eve. And they fell for it and that first sin led to the evil of this world that we have all inherited.

And so the Serpent/Devil was busy in the ancient world trying to undue and to destroy what God had created so perfectly. In our Epistle lesson the devil is called **“the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.”** And yes, he continues to be ever so busy, from heaven to earth, today in our lives. The Bible calls our sin, “the Old Adam”, a daily spiritual struggle to reject the devil and to follow the True God.

God’s Word in the Bible is the record of the devil’s evil pursuit to destroy the Kingdom of God. That brings us to this story of the Hebrew people of Israel in the Old Testament book of Numbers. These were the descendents of the family of Abraham. They survived the horrible years of slavery in Egypt and now in this story they are fighting for independence in the Holy Land of Israel where God had returned them and given them this special territory. God used these Hebrews to be the chosen family to which the God/Man Jesus of Nazareth would come to finish the battle against the Serpent/Satan.

This is a story of SIN and a story of GRACE. It is the sin and the consequences that separate the people, all people from the True God. In this true story the people of Israel were hungry and became impatient and their impatience turned to rebellion. Verse 4-5 says: **“..And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses...”** Sin is our stain too, our temptation to rebel against God’s will. We all have it and it is deadly, literally deadly, eternally deadly. God’s punishment to these rebellious Israelites was the deadly poison of fiery snakes.

But this is also a wonderful story of GOD'S GRACE. Our relief comes from outside of ourselves, from God Himself. And so we say: ***"O Give Thanks Unto the Lord"***.

GOD IS MERCIFUL EVEN IN THE DARKEST MOMENTS! Despite the sin and rebellion of the children of Israel God brought the people to repentance. Verse 7 says: ***"And the people came to Moses and said: "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that He take away the serpents from us."***

The light is Jesus who is God Almighty. He is our hope even in the darkest moments. In our Gospel of John 8 Jesus says: ***"Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going...I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me."*** Here Jesus reveals Himself as the Perfect solution to sin and death. The ancient serpent on the pole is a prophesy and a symbol, the greatest symbol of God's forgiveness that we see on the Cross of Calvary where the innocent Jesus publically volunteered to be brutally and barbarically killed as a sacrifice for the sins of the Israelites, and for your and my sins. The Gospel of John informs of this special connection of the Old Testament to the New and final Testament. In that famous passage of John 3. Verse 14 Jesus Himself says: ***"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."***

So our only relief is not a big bank account, not in a better job, not in the government, not even in our family. Our only relief in this troubled world is Jesus. Jesus is our hope and future. Jesus Himself said as He revealed His divine nature as God to His disciples: ***"You shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you Free." John 8:31-32. "O Give Thanks Unto the Lord, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever!"***

So there is hope for you and me in our moments of impatience and even despair. But let us not turn to good luck charms, to superstitions, to false idols, not to materialism, not to the latest technology or any other human solution. This story of the Bronze serpent shows that God can and will use anything and anyone to serve His spiritual purpose, to speak His truth, to bring people to their spiritual senses.

For example, God used Noah and a big boat, the Ark to save humanity. And in the next chapter of this book of Numbers we find the story of God's prophet Balaam? God used an angel and God even used Balaam's donkey and God made that donkey speak in order to correct Balaam when he didn't follow God's will.

Also another example, a few weeks ago we read the story of Jonah. It's an amazing story of God using all manner of earthly messengers. The Bible says in Jonah 1:4 that God ***"...hurled a great wind upon the sea and there was a mighty tempest on the sea..."***. And in verse 17: God: ***"...appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah..."***, Then in chapter 2:10: ***"..the Lord spoke to the fish and vomited Jonah out upon the dry land."*** Back on land the Bible says that God "appointed" a plant and then God "appointed" a worm and then God "appointed" a scorching wind to bring Jonah to his senses and so that finally, finally, finally after all that rebellion Jonah would do God's will to save the ancient city of Nineveh. God did it, God does it anyway He wishes but He does it for our good.

And our most powerful human symbols of God's presence are here, right here in our church, on the Holy Cross and in the water of Baptism and in the Bread and the Wine of the Lord's Supper that we are privileged to receive today. These sacramental elements have God's power for the forgiveness of our sins. Let us cherish them with all our heart!

LET US GIVE THANKS FOR GOD'S MERCY TO US AND ALL PEOPLE. ***"O Give Thanks unto the Lord for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever!"*** This prayer of thanksgiving is from Psalm 107, our psalm for today. It is also found in various Psalms: 100, 106, 118, 136. Which means that we should at all time give thanks for the blessings that God daily showers so richly upon us.

So was this idolatry to worship the statue of a snake on a pole? No, not when it is commanded by God as the powerful symbol of the Crucified Christ on the Cross! Let us daily repent and turn from the tempting evils of this world as our Epistle from St. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1-4; ***"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carry out the desires of the body and the mind and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."***

Be careful when you too get impatient for that impatience can lead to anger that leads to sin. St. Peter learned that the hard way. Often he spoke before thinking things out. But in the Gospel of Mark we read that he got it right. When Jesus asked the Apostles, ***"who do you say that I am?"***, Peter replied: ***"You are the Christ!"*** May we too get it right. Despite the temptations of the Evil One Jesus' life and death comfort and strengthen us in those moments of darkness. Let us always look to the Cross.

Because you and I are special to the Lord! We are not to be the instruments of the Devil and his demons of this modern anti-Christian culture. We are God's workmanship as St. Paul wrote in our Epistle: Ephesians 2:8-10: ***"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this not your own doing; it is the gift of God not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them"***. What a beautiful summary of our new life. Enjoy it, treasure and cherish your Christian identity.

"O Give Thanks Unto the Lord for He is good and His steadfast love endures forever". We say this prayer daily as a table prayer, in our church fellowships and hopefully at home at our dinner table. Let it always be more than just words but a sincere expression of the gratitude you have for your new life in Christ. Yes, the fiery serpents of this world will tempt you but you are God's workmanship to look to the Cross as you walk in good works, here in Manilla and wherever you go, this week and for all the days that the Lord gives you to live until He takes you to your heavenly home.

In Jesus' Name. Amen

Now may the peace of God which is beyond all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen