

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 10, 2024.

Let me start today with a confession. I am not a big fan of snakes. I prefer things that walk and talk, not slither and hiss. But I don't have a choice this morning. Our first lesson is about serpents. And not just any serpents. Poisonous serpents.

Really God? Do I have to? Yes, Charles, you must confront your fear. If you say so, Lord, I'll give it a shot.

Well, the first thing to note today is that our first lesson ends on a positive note. **(Numbers 21:9)** "So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

What's not to like? Happy endings are great. But, can it be that simple? Just turn our fears over to God, and God will take care of them? There must be more to this story.

And, sure enough, there is more. It's called the First Reading **(Numbers 21:4-9)**. The escape from captivity in Egypt was not going well. Can you say "venomous snakes"? Can you say "no food and no water"?

Well, fortunately God intervened. "The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at the bronze serpent and live.'" Good for God! The tide had turned. The Israelites were going home.

And what did they do when they returned? Today's Psalm **(Psalm 107:1)** tells us. They gave thanks to the Lord. Why? Because the Lord "is good, and his mercy endures for ever."

Sounds simple, doesn't it? Just trust in the Lord, and we will be okay. Just look at the bronze serpent, and we will live.

It's too simple, isn't it? Life doesn't seem to work this way. Maybe a few people can "Just trust in the Lord." But most of us fall short of this level of faith. Whether it's our experiences or the experiences of others, "just trust" is a really

high bar. Indeed, often when we have tried hard to clear this bar, we knock it off or it gets knocked off in some other way.

So, where are we? St. Paul wrestled with this question. **(Ephesians 2:1-10)** He spent a good part of his life setting the bar high for others and for himself. As, as it turned out, he and the others kept knocking the bar off. Just looking at the serpent wasn't working for him. And neither does it work for you and me. We want to save ourselves, but often good intentions fall short.

Just like Paul, we need help. Now this kind of help is not easy to find. We know that from our own experiences. But what we also know firsthand, in this setting, is that God in Christ steps in to help. Not in a theoretical way, but as a human being. The Incarnation. God's great gift to you and me. A new-born who grows into adulthood with a purpose. To save us from our inability to save ourselves.

Jesus will die in pursuit of our salvation. He walks to the Cross for our benefit. He is not dragged. He accepts his earthly fate, confident that His Father will bring something good out of crucifixion. And, sure enough, God does just that. And here we are, grateful for a remarkable level of sacrificial Love.

We no longer look at a bronze serpent for direction. We look rather at a carpenter from Nazareth. And it turns out that the **Wood of the Cross** is stronger than bronze. From Paul's Letter to the **Ephesians (2:9)**: "For by grace you have been saved by faith, and this is not your own doing; it is a gift from God."

Does this kind of faith pay dividends outside of the Church setting? Yes, it does. That's why we're here. We know our limitations. And we know that we need assurance. And maybe more than assurance about an outcome. We need Victory. We need something really strong to carry us through times of doubt. And, in the Risen Christ, we find that **Someone**.

From today's Psalm: "Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress." **(Psalm 107:19)**

Our final hymn today **(#522)** is entitled "Glorious things of thee are spoken." Its lyrics, as well as its tune, are powerful. Here is stanza 2.

See! The streams of living waters, springing from eternal love,
well supply thy sons and daughters and all fear of want remove.
Who can faint, when such a river ever will their thirst assuage?
Grace which, like the Lord, the giver, never fails from age to age.

Now, it is true that sometimes this level of Grace seems beyond our means. And, if truth be told, it is beyond our means. But you and I are not here because we are confident about our own means. Proud of our capabilities, to be sure, but also honest enough to accept our limitations.

That combination of pride and honesty, coupled with God's decision to fill in our blanks with the Love of Christ, is the draw of this place and houses of worship everywhere.

If Truth were not at the heart of what we do here, of what we believe, of what drives us, we wouldn't be here. St. Christopher-by-the-Sea wouldn't be here. **But we are here.** St. Christopher-by-the-Sea is here. And that's because the Risen Christ, as promised by God Himself, is here.

Jesus is the draw. We are the grateful disciples and the custodians of the Greatest Story ever told. What a privilege. And what a responsibility. And what an honor to be so loved.

Thank you, Jesus.

Amen.

Morning Prayer – Lent 4 – March 10, 2024

Hymn 470 – There’s a wideness in God’s mercy

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea;
there’s a kindness in his justice, which is more than liberty.
There is welcome for the sinner, and more graces for the good;
there is mercy with the Savior; there is healing in his blood.

There is no place where earth’s sorrows are more felt than up in heaven;
there is no place where earth’s failings have such kindly judgment given.
There is plentiful redemption in the blood that has been shed;
there is joy for all the members in the sorrows of the Head.

For the love of God is broader than the measure of the mind;
and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful, we should take him at his word;
and our life would be thanksgiving for the goodness of the Lord.

BCP - Page 76 – Lent Greeting

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us,
But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive in our sins and
cleans us from all unrighteousness.

BCP – Pages 79 – Invitation to Confession

Dearly beloved, we have come together in the presence of Almighty God our
heavenly Father, to set forth his praise, to hear his holy Word, and to ask, for
ourselves and on behalf of others, those things that are necessary for our life and
our salvation. And so that we may prepare ourselves in heart and mind to
worship him, let us kneel or sit in silence, and, with penitent and obedient hearts,
confess our sins that we may obtain forgiveness by his infinite goodness and
mercy.

BCP – Pages 79-80 – Confession and Absolution

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word,
and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not
loved you with our whole heart; we have loved our neighbors as ourselves.

We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. *Amen.*

Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. Amen.

BCP – Page 80 - Gloria

O Lord, open thou our lips.
And our mouth shall show forth thy praise.

*Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.*

BCP – Page 44 – Venite

O come, let us sing unto the Lord;
 let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation.
Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving
 and show ourselves glad in him with psalms.
For the Lord is a great God,
 and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are all the corners of the earth,
 and the strength of the hills is his also.
The sea is his, and he made it,
 and his hands prepared the dry land.
O come, let us worship and fall down
 and kneel before the Lord our Maker.
For he is the Lord our God,
 and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.
O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness;
 let the whole earth stand in awe of him.
For he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth,
 and with righteousness to judge the world and the peoples with his truth.

First Reading – Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
and his mercy endures for ever.

Let all those whom the Lord has redeemed proclaim
that he redeemed them from the hand of the foe.

He gathered them out of the lands;
from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

Some were fools and took to rebellious ways;
they were afflicted because of their sins.

They abhorred all manner of food
and drew near to death's door.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.

He sent forth his word and healed them
and saved them from the grave.

Let them give thanks to the Lord for his mercy
and the wonders he does for his children.

Let them offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving
] *and tell of his acts with shouts of joy.*

Second Reading – Ephesians 2:1-10

Hymn 656 – *Blest are the pure in heart.*

*Blest are the pure in heart, for they shall see our God;
the secret of the Lord is theirs, their soul is Christ's abode.*

*The Lord, who left the heavens our life and peace to bring,
to dwell in lowliness with us, our pattern and our King;*

*He to the lowly soul will still himself impart
and for his dwelling and his throne will choose the pure in heart.*

*Lord, we thy presence seek; may ours this blessing be;
give us a pure and lowly heart, a temple fit for thee.*

Gospel – John 3:14-21

Sermon – The Rev. Charles Rowins

BCP – page 96 - The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

BCP – page 97 – the Lord's Prayer

The Lord be with you.
And with thy spirit.
Let us pray.

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy Name, thy kingdom come,
thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.*

BCP – page 97-98 – Suffrages A

Show us your mercy, O Lord;

And grant us your salvation.

Clothe your ministers with righteousness;

Let you people sing with joy.

Give peace, O Lord, in all the world;

For only in you can we live in safety.

Lord, keep this nation under thy care;

And guide us in the way of justice and truth.

Let your way be known upon earth;

Your saving health among all nations.

Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten;

Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.

Create in us clean hearts, O God;

And sustain us with your Holy Spirit.

Collect for Fourth Sunday of Lent

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

BCP – page 257 – Prayer for Mission

O God of all the nations of the earth: Remember the multitudes who have been created in our image but have not known the redeeming work of our Savior Jesus Christ; and grant that, by the prayers and labors of your holy Church, they may be brought to know and worship you as you have been revealed in your Son; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

BCP – page 258 – Prayer for Peace

Almighty God, kindle, we pray, in every heart the true love of peace, and guide with your wisdom those who take counsel for the nations of the earth, that in tranquillity your dominion may increase until the earth is filled with the knowledge of your love; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

BCP – page 101 - The General Thanksgiving

*Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants
give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness
to us and to all whom you have made.*

*We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life;
but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by
our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.*

*And, we, pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly
thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips,
but in our lives, by giving up our selves to your service, and by walking
before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ
our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory
throughout all ages. Amen.*

Announcements

Hymn 717 - America – portions of stanzas 1 and 3

*My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing;
Long my our land be bright with freedom's holy light;
Protect us by thy might, great God, our King.*

BCP – page 59 – Prayer of St. Chrysostom

*Almighty God, who hast given us grace at this time with one accord to make our
common supplication unto thee, and hast promised through thy well-beloved Son
that when two or three are gathered together in his Name thou wilt be in the
midst of them: Fulfill now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of thy servants as may
be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of thy truth, and in the world to
come life everlasting. Amen.*

BCP – page 59 – The Grace

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the
Holy Ghost, be with us all evermore. *Amen.*

Hymn 522 – Glorious things of thee are spoken

*Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God;
he whose word cannot be broken formed thee for his own abode;
on the Rock of Ages founded, what can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded, thou may'st smile at all thy foes.*

*See! the streams of living waters, springing from eternal love,
well supply thy sons and daughters and all fear of want removed.
Who can faint when such a river ever will their thirst assuage?
Grace which like, the Lord, the giver, never fails from age to age.*

*Round each habitation hovering see the cloud and fire appear
for a glory and a covering, showing that the Lord is near.
Thus deriving from their banner light by night, and shade by day,
safe they feed upon the manna which he gives them when they pray.*

*Blest inhabitants of Zion, washed in the Redeemer's blood!
Jesus, whom their souls rely on, make them kings and priests to God.
'Tis his love his people raises over self to reign as kings:
and as priests, his solemn praises each for a thank offering brings.*

Dismissal

Alleluia! Alleluia! Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Alleluia!

Lessons for Lent 4 – March 10, 2024

Collect: Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

First Reading: Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
and his mercy endures forever.

Let all those whom the Lord has redeemed proclaim
that he redeemed them from the hand of the foe.

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from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

Some were fools and took to rebellious ways;
they were afflicted because of their sins.

They abhorred all manner of food
and drew near to death's door.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.
He sent forth his word and healed them
and saved them from the grave.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for his mercy
and the wonders he does for his children.
Let them offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving
and tell of his acts with shouts of joy.

Second Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not our own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast. “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Gospel: John 3:14-21

Jesus 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. 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 judgment, 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."

The Gospel of the Lord. *Praise to thee, O Christ.*