My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Lenten Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

We hardly ever encounter the book of Numbers in our lectionary. This passage is very odd, isn’t it? It harkens back to the garden of Eden, with imagery of the snake leading us into temptation and death where God has promised life. It’s a replay of that here: the people, once again tired of being in the wilderness in the midst of this 40 year journey, start to try and control their own stuff. Why could they just have attacked the Edomites and gone to Canaan and be done with it? Enough of this manna and having food and plenty the way we want it.

So God sends snakes to remind the people that trusting their own ways absent God leads only to what snakes give as they gave in Eden: death. In Eden, trusting the snake meant you get separation from God. Here, separation from God means you get the snake. In this place, physical and spiritual death are the same.

Those who insist on going their own way won’t make it; but those who understand the symbolism and the words of Moses that God is near and here will. It’s the same message the covenants have always promised: turn around, believe in God, and inherit eternal life.

Moses lifted up the symbol of death and asked the people to believe in God that they might be saved. Sin, lifted high on a cross: gaze on it. Believe it’s there. But in your belief, we know that it can no longer hurt us. God is with us, and is our strength and redeemer, Amen.

We could be done with our lesson for today right here, couldn’t we? But we’re in the middle of our series on the covenants of God. Did anyone see a covenant here? We know how our Bible connects things for us. So let’s look at the other part of our text today, John 3.

What has that passage said? Remember? We all know the famous bit, John 3:16. (recite this). But we don’t start there, we start a couple verses before that. Jesus compares himself to the snake on a stick.

But hold on. Jesus isn’t evil or snaky. What’s up?

Some Christians have called John 3:16 'the Gospel in a nutshell,' but John 3:16 is not enough to form a fully mature Christian life. Don’t get me wrong: belief is needed. Belief is essential. But belief is just entry stakes.

We use Jesus as a “get out of jail free” card just like in the Monopoly game to avoid thinking and reflecting on how we got to that point in the first place, rolling our dice and collecting property and money along the way, trying to strike it rich and then busy ourselves with managing the business—or rather busy-ness—that lets us leave belief as the only thing we focus on. Because that’s what Jesus says, believe. We kind of forget that there’s another 18 chapters of John’s Gospel and a whole bunch in the other Gospels too that say we have to do, too. Let me say that again: Belief is essential, but like all things God, it’s bigger than that.

Our covenant comes to us foreshadowed in the book of Numbers, and made real as the Word made flesh. God’s promise is eternal life, but what is that, really? What was it for the Israelites wandering the desert? Was it suddenly something other than manna to eat? Were there more water sources suddenly? Did they get a break on their 40 year sentence wandering around until they entered Canaan, not on their terms, but on God’s?

God does not promise a life free of hard times. Crops will fail, even like in last summer’s abundance of rain, it was just toooo much. Crops failed. Loved ones, and we ourselves, will get sick and suffer. Thank goodness for modern medicine, but the recovery can still be very hard. Eternal life does not mean we are free from eventual physical death. But what it does mean is that we do not need to fear the symbol of death, physical or spiritual, in the form of the snake, the image our Bible speaks of.

God covenants with us around something we can carry with us always. No matter how fit we are physically or mentally or emotionally—belief is powerful. It’s a root which can protect us from slipping away from God, and roots are strong when they are nurtured and fed.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

John’s Gospel is this beautiful poetry and mystery that God chooses to come closer to us by becoming one of us. Like the Israelites in the desert, maybe we are snakebitten by a world that is harsh and violent, and yet we may yet find new life through belief. There’s darkness for sure; but also light that darkness can’t overcome. That all depends on what we choose to lift up, doesn’t it?

The work of the Church is to lift up Jesus so that those who need healing can find it. It’s not always going to be high above the crowds. Sometimes we’re called to go into the ditches on the side of the road to heal those left for dead. Sometimes to go to persons who are left alone, knowing they are outcast from the rest. God must participate in our whole lives for us to know there is more; we, too, must spread hope beyond our families and comfortable lives to those who can barely go on.

We don’t come here to feel separate and superior from others; we come to know God is near and here. We come when we’re weary. We come because the snakes are all around us. We come to know that two roads diverge in a yellow wood, and that we are not to take the one well-trodden, but the one less-traveled-by.

Because it makes all the difference.

Thanks be to God, Amen. ,