

*They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; <sup>5</sup> they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"*

*<sup>6</sup> Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.*

*<sup>8</sup> The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived. (Numbers 21:4-9)*

### **Look and Live!**

I grew up near Lake Michigan. We loved going to the beach in the summer. Before I was pastor here, I also served near Lake Michigan. Again, we loved taking our children to the beach in the summer. But no one in my family is a particularly good swimmer. When I was kid already, I had a healthy respect for the big waves and the undertow on Lake Michigan. When I took my children there, if anything, that respect grew. When you walk on the pier in Grand Haven or in Muskegon, you pass life rings that are there in case someone gets into trouble. But do you know how to use them? I'm not an expert. If I ever had to throw one to someone, it might end badly. I could imagine me throwing way to the left or way to the right or way too short. And then I might have to wave my arms and jump up and down to get the attention of the person in trouble so I could point to where that life ring landed. If they could see it, they could live. Today, God gives us an example of an Old Testament life ring that he threw to his people. Through that life ring, he points us to the even greater one that he threw us. But you do have to see that ring to live. My friends, **look and live!**

#### **I.**

Of course, there is no real life ring in the story. The children of Israel were nowhere near an ocean. They were in the desert. But they were in danger and they did need God's rescue and he did give it. God told them to **look and live**. Doing so was **an act of repentance**.

God had led his people out of Egypt with one miracle after another. Then he brought them to Mt. Sinai, where he came down in fire and smoke and he spoke out loud to the people of Israel. Then he led them right up to the Promised Land. But they refused to go in. So they spent the next forty years wandering in the desert until God would bring them back again. This incident was near the end of those forty years. All during that time, six days a week, God did a miracle: he dropped bread on them from heaven. He supported two million people in the desert for an entire generation. How did the people respond? Again and again, they complained against God and against Moses. It was a sin that they just couldn't seem to resist. So today, we hear them grumbling again: **"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"** The miserable food, of course, was the manna from heaven.

How do you think God felt about that? Have you ever had children complain because they don't think you're supporting them in the manner they deserve? They don't like the food your serve or their friends have better video games? Have they ever made you wonder why you go to work every day to support such ungrateful kids? If so, you might have an inkling of how God felt when his people responded to all his love and care by complaining about how he was taking care of them. Of course, there was no temper in God. He's perfect. But he did punish them. God sent poisonous snakes among they people and they began to die.

Then they woke up. They came to Moses and said, **"We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us."** This was real growth for them. They recognized that they were guilty and that God's punishment was what they deserved. They recognized that the only way back was to repent and confess their sins. So they didn't make any excuses about how long they had been on the road or how hot the desert was or how understandable it was that they would feel that way. They simply confessed their sins and threw themselves on God's mercy.

That is the first, crucial lesson of this reading today. In the years that I've served in the ministry, again and again, I've seen how easy it is for us to forget what repentance really means. That's devastating because the Christian life is finally a life of daily repentance. Repentance begins with a simple recognition: I have sinned. Today, lots of people don't like that word "sin." They like to talk about making a mistake. Have you ever noticed that? When someone does something horrible and it's all over the news – for example some of these famous Hollywood figures who have been implicated in the sexual assault scandals – at some point they make a public apology. Almost always they say, "I made a terrible mistake." As if they bought the wrong kind of detergent and ruined your favorite shirt. They didn't make a mistake. They didn't accidentally force themselves on those women. They didn't try to do the right thing and just came up short. They indulged their egos and their sinful desires and they victimized those women.

The children of Israel didn't make that claim. They admitted to God and to Moses that they had sinned. Do we do that? That "mistake language" isn't just something Hollywood types use. I've heard lots of ordinary people try to downplay their sins like that. I've heard lots of ordinary sinners try to make excuses for the evil they have done. The truth is, I've done those things, too. Our natural inclination is to excuse ourselves or to blame someone else or to try to make it seem like we're really not bad people. We just made a mistake. But that's not repentance. Repentance begins when I admit that I sinned. I broke God's law and I deserve his punishment.

Why is that so hard for us? One reason is shame. We don't want people to think badly of us, especially people we like and respect. Shame gets in the way of you coming to me for forgiveness. You don't want your pastor to know what a lousy husband or wife you are. You don't want people to hear what you did or said or felt. You're embarrassed and you hide your sin. And again, I've been there, too. Again, that's not repentance. It's what Adam and Eve did when God came into the garden, but it's not what the children of Israel did when God sent these snakes to bite them.

They admitted to Moses and to God that they were guilty. How could they do that? Because they understood that confession is only half of repentance. They understood that the point of repentance is not to see how low we can bend or how much we can beat ourselves up or how bad we can make ourselves feel. Repentance is about being set free from all those things. It's about coming to the God who loves us and wants to forgive us and admitting that we need to be forgiven. It's about knowing that there is no limit to the love and forgiveness he will offer us. The children of Israel didn't know how God would rescue them. But they came to him because they knew that he would. So do we.

## II.

How did God rescue them? God had Moses make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. God chose a snake for the obvious reason that that's what was killing them. God told them that anyone who was bitten and then came and looked at the bronze snake would live. But why would anyone do that? In our day, sometimes we question whether what a doctor says will actually make us better. If it sounds painful or unusual, we might wrestle with what he wants us to do. But in the end, we usually do it because we like to think that there is sound medical science behind the recommendation. But if you were bitten by a poisonous snake and I told you to go look at a statue and that would cure you, would you believe me? Even in the ancient world, I think that would've been a little hard to swallow. Yet that's exactly what God told them to do. **Look and live!** Doing so was **an act of trust.**

Trust is the key to repentance. God says that all our sins are gone and even that he will free us from the punishment of those sins. We trust what he says. So there are two parts to repentance: sorrow and faith. God had Moses do this so that we can understand that. In our gospel lesson, we heard Jesus point to this very action as a picture of what he would do: **"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."**

Do you see the two parts of God's promise in Jesus' words? Part one is Jesus being lifted up. What does that mean? Well, in Lent how can we miss it? Jesus was lifted up on the cross. Jesus died there and he paid for all our sins. Before he died, God the Father abandoned him. My friends, that's hell. The heart of hell isn't just pain and fire. In hell, God abandons us. In hell, God takes away any chance of repentance, any chance of coming to him and begging for forgiveness. In hell, we are totally alone with our pain and our sin forever. So God the Father left Jesus alone on the cross with our sin and our punishment. Then Jesus died

because sin kills us just like it was killing the Israelites. Jesus paid all we owe. On Easter morning, he rose from the dead to tell us that!

Jesus points to part two also: everyone who believes in him, everyone who trusts what Jesus has done, is forgiven. Jesus died for the whole world. So there's no way you're excluded. But we need to trust Jesus did that for you and for me. We are like those children of Israel who grumbled against God's love and were bit by snakes. Moses has come into our tent while our limbs are on fire and our breath is getting weak and told us: "God has forgiven you. Just look at the snake and you will live. God promised that – just trust his promise." Now, it's not snakebite that's killing us. It's our own sin, the sin we committed already this morning. The sin that won't go away. Maybe it's even the same sin that Israel committed: we're not happy with how God is taking care of us and we grumble and complain and wish he would do a better job. For all our sin, our bodies are slowly dying and hell is waiting.

But Jesus was lifted up for us. He paid. And God has forgiven us. God has taken hell away. We may still die physically – but only if Jesus doesn't come back first. And then it will only last a moment and we will enter heaven and live with Jesus until these bodies rise and we live in a new and perfect world forever. Never again will we face pain or sorrow. Never again will we sin. All that is God's promise to us in Christ. Trust it and live!

How do we trust it? God came to us in this message and he gave us faith. He did that for every one of us. At some point in your life – when you were baptized as a baby or when some believer spoke to you – God reached into your heart and he planted trust there. But your trust is still yours. God doesn't believe for you. You believe. You show your faith just like the children of Israel did: you come to God for forgiveness. You know he will give it. When you wrestle with that promise, when it's hard to get past how terrible your sins have really been, you come to me and hear it applied directly to whatever sin is bothering you. But you confess your sin because you want peace, because you want forgiveness. You're like a thirsty man in the desert who comes to a well expecting to get a drink. Like the children of Israel, you come and look at the pole and the one who died there: Jesus. Every time you come to listen to the gospel, it is an act of faith. You come because God promises that here you will receive that water of life, here you will find peace, here your sins will be forgiven. Your trust that promise and you come to Jesus.

That's what repentance really means. Confessing how guilty we are and trusting in our Savior for forgiveness. Notice, I didn't say anything about changing our life. That is a fruit of repentance. It does have to be there, always. If we don't have any intention of trying to change, we aren't repentant. But weakness is not the same thing as being unrepentant. This wasn't the first time Israel grumbled and was disciplined and repented. Sadly it wasn't the last time either. But God kept coming to them with that good news. He kept working on their faith. That's true for you and me, too. We won't completely beat our sin until we reach heaven. But between now and then, God comes to us again and again and points us to Jesus who forgives even the sins we keep falling into. God throws the life ring to us. God tells us to look at Jesus and live. Amen.