

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

I don't know if I shared this with you before, but I come from a long line of Bishops, Harry Bishop my Brooklyn born, ethnically Ukrainian maternal grandfather, was a legendary figure. It is normal to have a sense of pride in one's ancestor's accomplishments and to craft a code of conduct or a family ethic based on their heroic deeds. One of my favorite tales of Harry Bishop shines for me as an example of bravery, tenacity, courage, and follow through. Grandpa Harry was afflicted, but did not despair. Although his adversary was animalistic he did not waver in his pursuit of justice, but saw his mission through to completion. I am of course referring to the time when Grandpa Harry was bitten by a stray dog. Legend has it that immediately after the menacing canine concluded his attack, Grandpa took flight after the dog. Even though the dog was no doubt faster and more agile, Harry determined and convinced, did not cease until he wrestled the beast to the ground and followed through with a disbursement of justice. The dog yelped and Harry had in his mouth a bite size portion of the dog's ear. I tell you this story, because I love you and you are my family and there are no secrets among family.

Today we hear that God sent fiery serpents to bite Israelites after they complained against God and Moses. This complaining, an outward manifestation of disobedience against God's Word, and God punishing is a repeated theme throughout the book of Numbers. In the 11th chapter they complained about the bland manna and demanded meat. God sent them an abundance of quail on which they gorged themselves, but then, before they even had time to floss, God sent a plague and many died. In the 14th chapter, the Israelite spies reported that the people they were to do battle with were giants. This news caused fear and they rebel against God and Moses. God wanted to destroy them all on the spot, but Moses told God that it would be bad public relations and that the neighboring people would think that Yahweh was weak if he let the people he lead out of bondage die. God then decides that all who rebelled would die in the wilderness and not reach the Promised Land. Even Moses himself is not spared from being punished for disobedience. In the 20th chapter, God instructs Moses to take his staff and go to a rock and speak to the rock and water will flow from it for the people to drink. Moses took his staff and did not speak to it, but struck it twice with his staff and water flowed. God saw Moses' action as disobedient and therefore as a sign of unbelief. His punishment by God was that he too would be prevented from entering the Promised Land.

While most of us may be uncomfortable with the idea that God sends calamity as punishment, it is important to understand how our ancestors in faith perceived their relationship with God. Can any of us unequivocally say that God does not act in history to reward and punish? I am not saying that God sent that dog to bite Harry or anything like that, but maybe we should not limit God's action and think we have the Divine all figured out. After all, can anyone here say that they have themselves all figured out?

The point of the story of Israel is not about God's punishment, but about God's love and deliverance. Just as the story of the people of God assembled here today is about God's love of us. (As little Teegan's baptism reminds us all)

After the people are bit by fiery serpents, and begin to die, they acknowledge and repent of their sin and ask Moses to call on God for help. God forgives them and provides a seemingly silly way out. Moses is to craft an image of this terrifying seraph- serpent upon a pole and the people are just instructed to look upon it. Simply ridiculous- how could they, by following these simple instructions reverse the hellacious effects of the venom? After all when a venomous snake bites, its poison attacks a persons neurological system while enzymes begin to digest the soft tissue starting at the bite site and migrating from there. The pain is intense, a high fever ensues, and the person's airway becomes compromised. Modern medicine makes use of anti-venoms given to the patient intravenously. The patient is usually always also intubated to ensure adequate ventilation and antibiotics are dispersed to guard against bacterial infections. Recovery is usually slow and takes days to weeks to even months. But all the people of Israel had to do was look, but looking is not always an easy thing to do is it?

I am sure many of you are feeling the burning sting of the financial market these days. Well how easy is it for you to open the statement to your pension fund or investment account and look at it??? It is frightening to look fear in the face.

While the country took a page out of Grandpa Harry's playbook in going after the AIG execs who were thrown an excessively meaty bone. We know that they are just small worms and that there is a much bigger serpent on the loose and we have all been bitten. The toxin has been working on us even here at HT.

The Israelites met the snakes when they were being less than faithful in their living. Our church is currently having a faith crisis of its own which has been festering for some time. The proof of our illness is in our stewardship and it is not only Holy Trinity it is the whole synod (as the bishop can probably attest). We have been relying too heavily for too long on the faithful giving of our ancestors, our endowment. And while our endowment funds are not a golden calf to be worshiped, but used in ministry, the large dip our portfolio has made has exposed our poor spiritual health. Our giving has been weak, our commitment has been halfhearted and our service has been lackluster. Why? Is it because we took our eyes off the cross, or think ourselves not in need of Christ? Do we blame the flailing economy? Are the slithering fluctuations of the market more powerful than our God? Is maintaining our lifestyle more important than responding to God's grace with thanksgiving?

I am telling the truth today, because I love you and we are family and there are no secrets among family. If our giving of time, talents and treasures were truly a joyful thanksgiving for our salvation we have in Christ, would not worship, mission, ministry and fellowship opportunities would be the first things on the family and our individual calendars? Would we not constantly discern how the talents that God entrusted to us could be used to God's glory, instead of shying away from opportunities to serve? When the pay check is cashed, the first thing that we would do would be fill our envelopes for church and then pay our bills and consider how to use the rest of our income- right?

Pastor Ralph Lowe of blessed memory must of understood well the connection between faith and giving, because one of the things that he stressed to Pastor Bang was that whenever the people of God gather, never forget to take an offering.

The gospel makes clear that works and offerings are not going to get God to love us any more than God already does. God's love for us is a gift of grace. We accept this gift through faith, which is a work of the Holy Spirit. As our faith grows internally it looks for outward expressions, stewardship is such an expression. Restricting the outward expression is like taking an anti-grace concoction robbing us of abundant life. In John's Gospel, eternal life is present and available for believers to enter into now; it is not something differed till after death.

In Today's gospel lesson, we find the most famous word's of Jesus, John 3:16. "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." These words were originally spoken to Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night. Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish ruling council and a Pharisee. He had official status and wealth- Jesus had neither. Jesus challenged the one who came to him under the cover of darkness to come to him in the light, to get out of the shadows and to follow him. Jesus challenges us to do the same. If we heed Jesus' words our belief is clear to see.

In speaking about the reading from Numbers, Luther commented, "Just looking at the serpent did not effect the cure; it was faith in the Word that did it. These people accepted the Word of God as a reliable promise of healing and deliverance from the poison."¹ It is this kind of faith, this kind of trust, that can also bring healing to our spiritual selves and our faith community today. Let us look at ourselves, our greatest adversaries in faith. Let us examine what we give and why we give; and if need be, let us take a bite out of ourselves to let some of our faith flow out.

Grace and faith flowed freely though our Lord Jesus. Our Savior and friend took a bite out of the big business of religion of his day, by exposing hypocrisy, insisting on equality, demanding justice and giving away healing grace. His biting exposure was undoubtedly less painful than the pain inflicted on all who were denied grace and comfort by the religious elite. But because Jesus could not keep his mouth shut, they found a way to silence him, the Roman way, on the cross.

When we find a way to silence Jesus' challenging voice, we reject our love for Him and distance ourselves from the beautiful relationship we have been gifted. In doing so we assume a part in Christ's crucifixion.

Yet here on the cross, God's true nature is clearly revealed. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved

¹Luther, M. (1999, c1957). *Vol. 22: Luther's works, vol. 22 : Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 1-4* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Jn 3:16). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

through him.” (John 3:17) Instead of destroying all who were responsible in the crucifixion of Jesus in every time and place, Jesus follows through with mercy greater than justice. He says, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” And instead of letting Jesus die, end of story- God raises him on the third Day. The sting of death, a sting connected to that original serpent in the garden has been overcome. God will not abandon us, even when we abandon God.

Brothers and Sisters, with this knowledge we don't have to wait till we are dead to start living like we will live forever. We will live forever, so we can start living with that in mind. With our eyes fixed on the cross of Christ, we know that God's loving mercy has been extended to us and this shapes our every reality, our living and our giving included. God did this for us, because God loves us and God calls us family. This news is too wonderful to keep a secret from the world, each other and even from ourselves!
Amen.