

From Unbelief to Faith  
Sermon for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent (Reminiszere)  
Sermon Text: Numbers 21:4-9



*From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And 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 loathe this worthless food.”<sup>6</sup> Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.<sup>7</sup> 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.” So Moses prayed for the people.<sup>8</sup> 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, shall live.”<sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.*

The most famous question of all has to be the “why” question. It begins already with the smallest of us: “Why do I have to go to bed so early?” or “Why do I have to go to school?” As parents, you know that you can speak to children in any language, but it won’t help because every answer is immediately followed with another, “but why?” The “why” question is also familiar to us adults: “Why do I have to pay so many taxes if the state doesn’t do anything about it?” or “Why do I have to take so much medication if it doesn’t help?” Especially when it comes to things that affect or question our existence, this “why” question comes up: “Why won’t the war in Ukraine end?” or “Why do people do so many evil things to each other? Why must there be so much evil in the first place?” As we can see from today’s Old Testament text, the “why” question was also familiar to the Israelites. They were supposed to go to the Promised Land, but this journey did not seem to be as easy as they had expected. Moses’ decisions seemed illogical, and the people rebelled: “Why all of this? Why did you lead us out of Egypt? Why do we have to keep eating this ‘manna to go’ that God gives us in the desert? Why can’t we go back to the pots of meat the Egyptians had?” The title for all of these “why” questions is: “The people spoke against God and against Moses.” This shows that it was not just about superficial matters, but that they fundamentally questioned God’s plan for them. The 40 years in the desert were a special test for the Israelites. The number 40 in the Bible indicates such trials and the number 40 shows us that this time was also a special time because it was during this time that God gave the 10 Commandments. So when the people ask these big “why” questions, it’s not just about the “desert menu,” it’s a rebellion against God’s efforts to save His people! Behind this “why” question is a rebellion against God that we have known since Adam and Eve – grumbling can be understood here as the opposite of faith. Those who do not believe can no longer see God’s hand in their lives. And those who can no longer recognize God’s hand in their lives are never satisfied, they never have enough, they are envious of others and do not look forward to what God may give them in the future, they always look back at what was supposedly better in the past and is unfortunately no longer so. Such unbelief separates us from God. And for the same reason, we as humans are sucked into the undertow of evil and unbelief.

All these evil things are illustrated by the serpents who came like fiery darts into the crowd of Israelites and spread their poison so that there was no escape. They brought death and devastation everywhere. This story of the terrible serpents comes from ancient Israel. Some people may say: Thank God there are no such vermin in our modern Leipzig! In the story of Moses, the poisonous snakes are described as fiery creatures. You could say they were the epitome of evil and what they spread was the ultimate evil that came from among the people. In this figurative sense, we also know the poison of such snakes in our own lives, even if we are far away from the desert of Sinai. It takes no imagination to recognize the poison of evil, for it is everywhere to be seen: in terrible wars, horrible murder stories, child abuse, and the torture chambers of the whole world. But the same poison also stirs within us, be it in

personal addictions, in disputes within families or in the inability to forgive within the Christian community. It doesn't take any imagination to recognize this within ourselves too. It is not simply a small flaw, but poison... and poison brings death.

It's interesting to note that the people no longer ask "why" questions during this serpent event. On the contrary, when the snakes appeared, the realization came automatically. Moses didn't need to say a word because the people themselves knew where the evil came from. They came to Moses themselves and said: "We have sinned by speaking against God and against you." Two things seem to be essential here: First, the people knew exactly where the venom of the snakes came from – from their own sin. They clearly recognized that. Second, they also recognized who could help – God alone. Against the poison of sin, death, and the devil, there is only One who is strong enough and it's God. And God prepared a strange way to save the people, Moses was to make a snake and place it on a pole. Anyone who looked at it would be saved.

It's worth pausing here for a moment because the secret of faith lies hidden in this story. In order to heal the people of Israel from the deadly snake bites, God does not simply send a command from heaven to eradicate all snakes and heal the sick. No, in the midst of the people plagued by snakes, God challenged the people's faith. All they had to do was look. But they were not simply to look into nothingness, but to look to the place where God had created help – to the pole where the bronze serpent is. It's actually a completely crazy thing to do but the only thing that's not crazy about it is that God said it Himself. How did this even work back then? You have to imagine that with the great multitude of all the Israelites, there was a huge camp. The bronze serpent, even though it was on a high pole, was probably not immediately visible to everyone. The people who had been struck down by the poison were still lying weakened in their tents. I wonder how it happened that everyone saw the snake. Of course, the message spread from tent to tent, from family to family, from clan to clan. Some struggled to get out of their tents and said: "If God chose this way through Moses, then it must be right, even if it is strange." Maybe the first ones just looked cautiously at the snake, maybe they didn't quite know what to make of the rumor. But they did it, because Moses had said so. And when they realized that looking at it helped, this good news set the whole nation in motion. Naturally, everyone wanted to look. That's the story of faith – from death to life.

Imagine if the story had gone differently, that is, without faith. Then Moses would have received a message from the bronze serpent and contradicted God. For example, he would have said: "I'm not even going to start such a crazy thing. I've already been bullied enough by the people, and it's actually their own fault that they were bitten by the snakes. So let them stew in their own juice!" Or imagine if he had had the snake erected and all the people had flatly refused to look. Then everyone would have died.

But that's not what happened. People looked and were healed. This story was recorded in the Old Testament for a reason. In the Gospel of John, Jesus quotes this exact passage and relates it to His death on the cross: "*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.*" (John 3:14-15) God's people in the New Testament, just like God's people in the desert, are gathered around the cross. The cross is the only cure for the poison that stirs in and around us. We still feel this poison, even in our own bodies. Nevertheless, the poison of eternal death has disappeared. It shall not reign over our lives forever. God linked healing to a specific person, Jesus. Death will no longer have the last word here. Of course, Satan and our own laziness keep trying to keep us away from this faith in Jesus. The Old Testament story makes it clear that faith sets things in motion. Perhaps timidly at first, but then it went through the whole nation. They said: "Looking really works!" The interesting thing is that the snakes were still there. They stayed for a while and their venom stayed for a while too. But anyone who was bitten only needed to see the bronze serpent and they didn't have to die. So it is with Jesus. Despite all the poison in our world and in our lives, we feel how His power works in us and gives us life. Then we can tell everyone: "This thing with Jesus really works!" Amen.