

THE GREAT SWITCH

Numbers 21:4-9

The Ames Community School District needs a new superintendent. Hopefully the selection of candidates will not be like the national elections where a lot of people feel they are just picking the lesser of two evils. It is good to have good, clear, logical reasons for choosing someone for an important position.

But the way that God chose to save the Israelites in our text certainly doesn't seem logical. We heard in our Old Testament Lesson one of the more bizarre stories in the Bible. A plague of snakes sounds like something from Indiana Jones. And what is really strange is what God told Moses to do. "Make a snake and put it on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." Why not send lightning to zap the snakes or suddenly make them disappear? Why not send the warriors with their weapons to kill them? Why put up a pole of all things a bronze snake? Why not use a candle or staff or some other symbol of God's presence? Why a snake?

When else do we see in the Bible a snake on a pole? We know the old story of Adam and Eve and how the devil took on the form of a snake and spoke to them about a tree. A snake and a tree—the means by which people fell into sin becomes in the wilderness for the children of Israel a means to salvation. The symbol of death becomes a symbol of life. What a great switch!

The link between those two events is Jesus. In our Gospel lesson Jesus says, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted, that everyone who believes in His Name may have eternal life." A snake and a tree—a reminder of how we first fell into sin becomes "sin" on a tree. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For our sake God made Jesus to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." A snake and a tree—Jesus on the tree—the sin that separates us from God becomes Jesus who died on the cross so that we can be reunited with God. Who of us would want to be an Osama bin Laden or an Adolph Hitler or Joseph Stalin—the bad guy, the object of scorn? Yet that is exactly what Jesus became on the cross for you and me. The source of death—sin on a tree—becomes the source of life. What a great switch!

From death to life—do we see the implications of that great switch? God didn't save the children of Israel from those snakes with lightning or fire. Nor does He save us from sin that way. The symbol of our salvation is a cross—the means of death. God's great switch doesn't just mean that Jesus would rescue us, just as He did the children of Israel, in an unexpected way. It means that we live in that switch, trusting not in what we expect, but in what God gives to us.

The children of Israel didn't expect to do things God's way. After God had dramatically rescued them from the Egyptians through the waters of the Red Sea, they expected to waltz right into their promised homeland in Canaan. Instead, God had them wander in the desert—not what they expected. Maybe they were slaves in Egypt, but at least they could see in Egypt that

they had a ready supply of food and water. God had performed a great switch by freeing them from slavery. But did they expect that switch?

Do we expect things to go God's way? In Christ God has freed us from sin. That sin has been nailed to the cross with Him. But do we want it there? Do we want to go on living in God's switch, or do we want to return to our old self? Jesus said in our Gospel, "This is the verdict. Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light." God doesn't call us out of sin into instant fame, instant luxury, and instant enjoyment. He calls us to a cross—a symbol of death. To live with him, to switch from death to life, we have to put to death the old. Compare the amount of time we spend watching TV with the time we think about God—or others. Compare what we give of our treasures to help others with our willingness to forgive and accept God's forgiveness. Do we want to live in God's great switch?

In a student bible class a student mentioned how often it is only in bad times that he turns to God for help. He can see the truth of what Paul said in Romans 5, "We rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us." Martin Luther put it this way, "We should pray to God for trouble, for it is in adversity that we grow closer to God." Now what a great switch that is! Think of the prayers we usually offer to God—for peace, for healing, for strength, for comfort. But do we want to pray for adversity? In Acts 4, after Peter and John were arrested and the early Church after Jesus' ascension first faced persecution, the people prayed not for deliverance from that persecution, but for the boldness to share their faith in the face of that trouble. A pastor from India that I knew at seminary shared about the persecution of Christians in his country. I asked if that worried him. He replied, "No, because then I know that we are really making a difference in the lives of people there." Now that's the great switch, God turning fear into opportunity, sorrow into joy, death into life!

But can that switch happen to us? Are we supposed to ask God for calamity and pray to Him, "Cause a great disaster to fall on our country so that we turn from our evil?" No, we don't pray for that, but why do we pray to God for peace, for prosperity, for health? Is it because we want to do God's will or because of what we stand to get out of those things? Do we want to go to heaven to be with God forever because we love Him, or so that we don't have to go to hell (in other words, because I love me)? There is a big difference. Yes, the children of Israel looked on that bronze snake to save their necks. But did that really save them? Many of those same people in Number 24 still complained to God and were punished in a plague. Many who made it into the Promised Land forgot about God and worshiped idols. Only those who looked in trust, who loved God, not just to save their hides, but because He is God, were truly saved. So do we accept God's great switch? Do we believe in Him only to save us or to truly be our God?

Jesus said in our Gospel, "Whoever lives in the truth comes into the light so that it may be seen plainly what he has done has been done through God." The great switch is not only that God made Jesus to be sin for us, but that He switches our master from sin into Himself. It is not just that we are free from sin. We want to be free. None of us wants suffering, pain, loneliness,

and death. But we want God most so that we can be willing to take on any of those rather than lose God.

A snake on a pole. Our Savior on a cross. That is not what we would expect. But neither do we expect life from death. Our God has done that great switch and continues to do it in us. Thus we can rejoice in Him not only despite, but because of suffering as we grow closer to Him. God grant that each day we be switched through Christ's death and resurrection from death into life.