

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
March 22, 2009
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Celebrating God's Grace,
Numbers 21: 4-9, Ephesians 2: 1-10, John 3: 14-21

“Once there was a congregation that was having a meeting to discuss a building expansion program. It was a big proposal; the project would take lots of time and money. Everything seemed to be going fine at the meeting, until a long-time member — a man of the proverbial ‘few words’ — rose up, and announced to the assembled company that he was ‘agin’ it.” “An awkward silence descended ... but then, someone turned to the man and asked, ‘Why?’ The man drew himself up to his full height. ‘I’m agin’ it,’ he said, ‘because of the chandelier.’ ‘What’s wrong with having a chandelier?’ The neighbor who asked was new to the church. She didn’t understand that the phrase, ‘I’m agin’ it,’ was meant to close off debate, bringing the project to a screeching halt. ‘Well, in the first place,’ explained the old-timer, ‘I think it costs too much. In the second place, I doubt we have anyone who could play the chandelier. And in the third place, what this church really needs is better lighting.’” “Some people are just ‘agin’ it’ — even if they don’t know what it is they’re ‘agin’.” “Emphasis,” March/April 2006

This man’s ignorance of the facts and lack of trust in his church was about to leave him in the dark where he was trying to lead others. Such ignorance of God’s ways and a lack of trust in him that leads us to into the darkness and destruction caused by our sins is one of the messages contained in today’s scripture lessons. In an unusual story along this theme in Numbers, we come across the Hebrew people who had been wandering in the wilderness for forty years. Even though God freed them from slavery in Egypt and was leading them to the Promised Land, they became impatient, quarrelsome and recalcitrant over the lack of plentiful water and variety of food. They had become an ungrateful people and complained bitterly to Moses and God. They went so far as to accuse “God of infidelity, and Moses of poor, failed leadership.” “Emphasis,” March/April 2009, Texts For Preaching Year B pg. 221.

This attitude of ignorance and lack of trust angered God and “he gave the people over to a horde of poisonous snakes. The Hebrew actually means ‘fiery snakes,’ so-called presumably because their bites caused such a terrible burning. Such creatures are common in that region of the world. After enough deaths, the people realized that God was justly punishing them, and they pleaded for Moses to intervene on their behalf. The people had been brought to their knees, and their words sounded very much like a confession of sin. But what could be done for them?” The people’s ignorance and lack of trust in God brought only darkness and punishment upon them.

“Emphasis,” March/April 2009.

In John 3, we hear of this same ignorance of God’s ways and lack of trust in him when Jesus says: “but those who do not believe (in him) are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.” In this case Jesus was

saying God was not doing any punishing, but those who chose to refuse to believe in him and follow his ways had already condemned themselves to a self-inflicted punishment. Because of their ignorance of God's ways and lack of trust in him they were destroying themselves.

Adolf Hitler was one such case. He knew enough of the Christian faith to twist it to meet his own evil desires. He was so far into darkness and lies that he did not recognize the light of truth even when it was right before his eyes.

"William B. Breuer tells in his book, Undercover Tales of World War II about German spies who parachuted behind Soviet lines and masqueraded as Russian soldiers. Amazingly, they gained complete intelligence not only about the placement of Soviet troops and the timetable of their planned offensive, but they also secured the map of the entire Russian railroad system. One of the soldiers died, but one returned to Berlin and handed over the complete Russian positions and plans."

"Hitler, however, refused to believe the information, dubbing it a great bluff. Two weeks later the Soviet Army struck viciously exactly in the predicted sectors. Hitler demonstrated evil in that, if you live by lying ("hating the truth"), you finally can't even recognize the truth." As we all know, Hitler's ignorance of God's ways and lack of trust in God led millions of others into the darkness of sin and in the process Hitler condemned himself to death. "Emphasis," March/April 2009.

According to Ephesians, the ancient Hebrews, and people like Adolf Hitler were not the only ones who set themselves up to suffer in darkness and condemnation because of their ignorance of God's ways and mistrust of God. All humanity has done this at some time to itself. As Ephesians says: "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else." Too often in history and in our lives, when God was for life, light and goodness, out of our ignorance and mistrust we were "agin it, "agin" God, and misled ourselves and others into the darkness of sin and death.

All this is one aspect of the teachings of today's lessons. Praise God, there is another side to our story and God's ways of handling our sin. This other side is called GRACE! Grace is God's unconditional love. Grace is God's way of saving us from our sins. Grace is the basis for our salvation. Grace is a gift from God.

God's grace was given to the Hebrews when they realized they had sinned and needed to be rescued from their fiery snake biting dilemma. Who did they turn too? They asked Moses to intervene on their behalf with God, the God who had saved them from slavery and was sustaining them in the wilderness. Moses pled the people's case to God and God responded to save them in a most unique way. "God had Moses make a poisonous serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live." God took that very thing that was killing people and used it to save them. It is somewhat like we do with snake venom today. The very poison that can kill us can also save us as a serum. The use of the snake in this manner reflected an ancient Egyptian practice and belief about

the cobra whose purpose was to destroy and protect. The use of the snake also symbolized that God could both destroy and protect. It called for people to trust God. Out of his grace, he chose to save the Hebrew people from their sins of ignorance and mistrust. The gift of saving grace was given to them when they trusted God, again.

When Jesus spoke with Nicodemus he spoke of this same healing symbol of the bronze serpent raised up on a stick. Of course, Jesus was referring to his being nailed to and being raised up on the cross to die as the healing grace of God who took away the sins of the world. Instead of a bronze serpent, the church uses the symbols of the cross, of the Eucharist, the bread, the wine and the cup, and of baptism, that is the font to remind us of how when we were helpless in our sins, Christ died for us. John 3:16-17 says it so well, "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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Ephesians 2 proclaims God's same act of grace in Jesus Christ in a different way: "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved-- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--not the result of works, so that no one may boast." God used more than a bronze snake on a stick to save us from our ignorance of his ways and our lack of trust in him. Out of sheer love, with no conditions attached, God gave his very heart to us in his Jesus. The grace of God in Jesus Christ, the blood of Christ shed on the cross, became the serum to save us from the poison of sin.

Though we know all this and have heard it many times before, have we really let it sink in so that we fully trust God? Have we listened to it and learned from it so that we are no longer ignorant of God's ways? Do we see the light of God's grace guiding us through the darkness of this world? If you have responded to God's saving grace in Jesus Christ by publically confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior as Branden Braisted, Judy Lissman, Pat Fairbanks, Susan Painter, and Ron Vines are doing today as a reaffirmation of their faith, then there is an outward evidence that the saving serum of God's grace has entered your bloodstream, your heart, mind and spirit by the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result of this, you have at least begun to learn of God's ways and to see his light in Jesus Christ guiding you through this world of darkness and confusion. By grace, God raises us up to be one with Christ. When all this sinks in there is no finer realization in life that one can have than this amazing grace.

Once this grace of God takes hold of us—remember it is not a work or choice we have made for ourselves—God has done it all for us, we will also realize as Ephesians says that: "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." In response to this magnificent grace of God, God has some things for us to do so that others might learn God's ways, trust their lives to him and celebrate this saving grace with us. Maybe what God has in mind for you, you are already doing. Maybe it is in sharing your presence in worship, in

the tithes and offerings of time, energy and money you give to the church; maybe it is in the work you do outside the church, in the way you treat others at home, in school or at the office? Maybe it is in your prayers and Bible study? Maybe God has yet to call you to service? It took a while to happen to a man named "Maewyn Succat. Although born to Christian parents, he did not follow in their faith. He lived a life apart from faith." He was "agin" God. "When he was about sixteen, he committed a particularly heinous sin, on which he never elaborated. Shortly thereafter, Maewyn's town was raided by Irish raiders who kidnapped him and carried him to Ireland. He was sold as a slave and toiled for six years as a shepherd. On those Irish hills, God called Maewyn. Maewyn began to pray and as he related, "More and more did the love of God, and my fear of him and faith increase." One day he dreamt he heard a voice saying, "Lo, your ship is ready." Maewyn believed this was God calling him to leave Ireland. He found a ship and after first being refused passage, eventually boarded and returned home to Britain. He wasn't there long when during his prayer time he heard God call again, this time to return to Ireland. Maewyn became a priest, much to the displeasure of his parents, took the name Patrick, and returned to Ireland. For over thirty years, Patrick labored in Ireland, preaching the gospel to many." The legend is that he chased all the snakes out of Ireland, too. "Today we remember Maewyn each March 17 on Saint Patrick's Day." Patrick is one whose ignorance and mistrust of God was overcome. He was rescued from the darkness and made alive with Christ by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

If the snakes of this world are biting and poisoning you, and if the darkness of sin has overcome you, come join us in trusting in the lifted up Christ who saves us from our sins and calls us to serve him by the wondrous grace of God. "Emphasis," March/April