**IN NOMINE JESU**

**BEHOLD IN THE FAITH YOUR SALVATION LIFTED UP**

Christ is Risen!

Hear again the Word of God for this sixth Sunday in the season of the Resurrection of our Lord,

*And YHWH said to Moses, “Make for yourself (a) Seraph and set it upon (a) pole. And (it will be) that each one who has been bitten, and sees it, shall live.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

# Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

The texts for this week are given to direct you to behold in the Faith your Salvation lifted up. This day’s texts appear every year on Rogate Sunday, which is numbered as Easter 6 in the more historic series of readings through which congregations like this one receive God’s gifts. (Today’s readings also appear on Holy Cross Day, September 14). Rogate Sunday breaks the pattern of naming the Sundays in the Easter Season after the opening words of the Introit Psalm. This day is so named for the rogation days which appear before the Feast of the Ascension. These days of remembrance were brought forward to us from the Church in Gaul (around A.D. 469). They were later codified in A.D. 511 at the Synod of Orleans for use in the universal Church.

Rogation days are held for three days. They consist of fasting accompanied by prayer litanies to precede that High Feast. To help us in remembering the ancient practice of the Rogation days, this Wednesday evening service will replace the Deacon’s Prayer litany with the Great Litany. This was adapted by Dr. Luther in A.D. 1529. It has been prayed in evangelical congregations since. In our era of the Church, recalling the rogation days can help to remind us that all that remains visible to us of the crucified, risen and ascended Lord Jesus are the Sacraments. That, along with our liturgical actions (Bible raised up for the reading of the Gospel in the Service of the Word; consecrated wine and host, the Very Body and Blood of Jesus, elevated above the table in the Service of the Sacrament of the Altar), should serve to recall that we behold in the Faith our salvation lifted up. All of that was prefigured in God’s instruction to the man who was serving Him to His grumbling, complaining, ungrateful people, as our text declares:

*And YHWH said to Moses, “Make for yourself (a) Seraph and set it upon (a) pole. And (it will be) that each one who has been bitten, and sees it, shall live.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Some of you have likely heard, in that repeated translation, a word that is familiar. It is a word that we sing, in the plural, in the Festival Service. That order, drawn directly from Luther’s German Mass is the service in which we usually receive God’s gifts during the Five High Feasts (Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost, Nativity, and Epiphany). Seraph is a word that sounds out from, “Isaiah, Mighty Seer in Days of Old.” There we sing along with the six-winged Seraphim, the “Burning Ones,” whose heavenly worship we participate in as they continually chant before the Face of God the threefold, “Holy is God.” Therefore, on this day that prepares us for the rogation days of fasting and prayer, you are called to behold a connection between Isaiah’s vision of the winged ones, and the fiery serpents sent among God’s people as a punishment for their sins. Hear again the manner in which our text for Rogate begins:

*Then they set out from Mount Hor, (by) way of (the) Reed Sea to go around the land (of) Edom. And it became impatient, (the) soul of the people in (the) way.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

You may recall that when that took place, God had recently delivered His chosen people, Israel, from their slavery through the waters of the Red, or Reed, Sea. They had witnessed the waters washing over their evil foes, and had been freed to go into the promised land. The Israelites had already been wandering on account of their sins. They had repeatedly received punishments that moved them to confess their sins, and had been forgiven and restored. Their High Priest, Aaron had just died, and the congregation had mourned for 30 days. Eleazar, Aaron’s son, had been consecrated in his place.

God was leading His people by a circuitous route into the Promised Land. They had been consigned to 40 years of wandering, until the generation that doubted God’s word of conquest had died. God through Moses, was moving the people from that which we call the Sinai Peninsula north and east to set them to enter the land of milk and honey from the Transjordan east to west. They were set to bypass the land of Edom (which means, Red) for their ancient relatives had refused them direct passage through their land.

It might help you to think of their convoluted route as if you were being led by your pastors to attend a conference in Phoenix from Catalina by way of Safford and Globe because Florence, Coolidge, and Casa Grande had refused us direct passage. Imagine taking that long route on foot, and how weary you would become. You would surely know that you could have saved a couple of hundred miles by being allowed to take a direct route to Phoenix. With that in mind, return to our narrative, as it continues:

*Then the people worded against Elohim and against Moses: “Why have you caused to bring us up from Egypt to die in (the) wilderness? For, no bread have we, and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

To return to our Catalina-to-Phoenix illustration, you who were walking the 314 miles that should be 110 would also likely voice your complaints. You might say something like this: “Our pastors give us measly bits of bread, and little sips of wine to carry us through.” (Never mind that we actually do that with God’s promise that you will be strengthened through your wandering years in this Sin-filled creation through His means of grace that you might have God’s Presence to carry you into the eternal Promised Land). You actually have a more intimate contact with the Real Presence of the Living God than those ancient grumbling Israelites! Perhaps you can behold yourself as a sinner like them. You should be able to see yourself as ones grumbling that your leaders had designed the trip to kill you on the way. If so, you are being thus prepared to receive His grace by beholding Him in the Faith: Salvation lifted up, that He might draw you to Him, to grant you forgiveness.

God’s people repeatedly despise His gifts, especially the ones that come to them free and grant them life. From Adam’s desire to eat that which was forbidden, and thus be like God, to the Israelites who had been daily given the bread of angels, to the congregations of the New Covenant era who disdain God’s chosen means of grace, God’s people continue to reject His gifts. He, in love for them, for you, continually calls them, you, to return to Him. At times, in time, He brings punishment upon His sinning people, that they might confess their sins, will to turn from them, and walk in the forgiveness He freely offers. That is displayed in this record from the wilderness wandering:

*Then YHWH sent among the people the serpents, the Seraphim, and they bit the people and died many people from Israel.[[5]](#footnote-5)*

There, you heard that word again, this time in the plural, just as you sing it! God, Who had repeatedly granted free gifts to sustain the lives of His people, Who had given them Water from the Rock when it was struck (which was Christ our Lord), again on account of His mercy for those who are being saved, sends punishment upon His sinning ones. The word, “Seraphim,” means “burning ones,” or, “fiery ones.” They went amidst those who were denying God’s grace, who wanted salvation from their wandering in sin, the unrepentant murmurers against God and His called servants were bitten unto death by those fiery serpents.

Even so, in the New Covenant era, in the times when God’s people begin to complain against Him and to reject His grace, they receive the punishment inflicted by the burning ones, the Seraphim. Their unrepentant sins bring upon them the fiery bites of demons, torments of conscience, more sin, death and hell itself. When the sinning Christians of our era, those who behold the attacks that are inflicted upon them on account of their unrepentance, and will to turn from that they, you, also do in like manner that which the ancient Israelites did:

*Then came the people to Moses, and they said: “We have sinned, for we worded against YHWH and against you! Pray to YHWH and He will cause to take away from us the serpents.” Then prayed Moses.[[6]](#footnote-6)*

Why, my goodness, the Israelites followed a rite of Confession and Absolution in the manner of today’s Divine Service. While the biblical record is more abbreviated, you can still hear, in that confession, words which we spoke in unison today: “Most merciful God, we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned against you…” and so forth. In every era, God’s people not only commit individual sins, they participate in community sins. In each age of the Church, when God’s people hear His Word that burns, His fiery Seraphim, they are moved by the Spirit working through that Word to confess their sins and call out, through God’s chosen mediators, for His mercy.

In the Old Covenant, the mediator was the man, Moses. He was God’s chosen savior of His people, with whom God would speak. The Israelites, receiving the burning bites their sins brought to them, sorrowed over their sins, and desired to return to the Lord their God through the mediator they knew. Through his intercession, God relented of continuing to inflict the burning punishment his people deserved. He did so through earthly means, as our text returns our thoughts to today’s theme text:

*And YHWH said to Moses, “Make for yourself (a) Seraph and set it upon (a) pole. And (it will be) that each one who has been bitten, and sees it, shall live.”[[7]](#footnote-7)*

God, Whose word in the Ten Words, Ten Commandments, under His explanation of the First Commandment, had already forbidden His people to make graven images. Even so, He was keeping to the Spirit of the Law. For He was not calling the repentant ones who had the burning bites to worship the Seraph (Serpent) on the pole. He was calling them to look to it in the Faith, in His promises, in His forgiveness.

That image, cast in bronze—reddish in color to remind them of the burning serpents—stood amidst God’s people for over 700 years. God’s people had gone from looking in the Faith to God for life from death through the means of a lifeless image, to worshipping the image itself. They had again followed the religions of their world, and were worshipping a serpent god, rather than the God Who wills to remove the serpent’s fiery bite. For that reason, sometime between the years 716 and 687 B.C., good and faithful Israelite King Hezekiah had order the image destroyed.

In the Jewish wisdom literature of the intertestamental period, that serpent on a pole was called a *symbol having salvation into remembrance of the commandments of (the) Law of [God].[[8]](#footnote-8)* The ancients, long after the Seraph on the pole was gone, were taught that the *one who looked toward it, was, not through the seeing saved, but through [God] the Savior of all*[[9]](#footnote-9). They, who had yet to behold the image on the pole that displays the triumph of the One Who, when beheld in the Faith, takes away sins’ burning bites, still understood that the image was God’s means to present His grace to those who willed to turn from their sins.

From the witness of Scripture, and the faithful sermon you have heard over the years concerning this text, you likely have developed an understanding that the images of the bronze serpent and Christ on the Cross are inexorably linked. Jesus Himself, through the eye-witness testimony of the Apostle and Evangelist, declared that the lifeless reddish image of the serpent on the pole was given to the faithful in order to foreshadow the lifeless image of the Son of God on the stick (*John* 3:14-15). The graven image of the bronze serpent and the graven image of Christ, the Image of God dead in our sins are irrevocably linked by the Word of God from the mouth of Jesus. With eyes of the Faith, you may behold your true healing from the fiery bites of the serpents that plague you, and us. As Jesus is the image of the Living God, Who conquered the ancient serpent in His death, we are free to behold Him in the Faith through the images of the Church, just as the ancient faithful were. Hear again our text, as it draws to a conclusion:

*Then made Moses (a) bronze serpent, and he caused to set it unto (a) pole, and it was, if the serpent bit (a) man, and he would be caused to look to the bronze serpent, he lived*.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The word for the serpent used in the verse before, Seraph, is replaced by another word. It is the word used for the snake in Genesis, the form which the Angel of Light used to deceive Eve and tempt Adam into his fall into sin. The word for the snake in the Garden appears to be drawn from the word we translate, “to hiss.” Even in our language, we might say a burning fire may produce a hiss as steam escapes from wood that is not completely dry.

As the Church again around the world, and particularly in this place, approaches the rogation days of fasting and prayer before the Feast of the Ascension, God’s word reminds us that He brings healing to those bitten by their sins, by our sins. It returns us to the reality that He allows images in His Church that today, depict the lifeless image of Jesus hanging over the fallen creation. In that image lifted up, suspended between heaven and earth, the Faithful in the Church behold Jesus after He had received the full brunt of the Ancient Serpent’s bite. There we see God’s victory trophy over the Satan’s bites—even sin, death and hell itself. You remain free to look with the Faith to the Man on the cross, be healed and know that God has removed the fire of His wrath from you!

Christ is risen!

 **The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**

Resurrection VI(*LSB* One-year series)

Numbers 21:4-9; I Timothy 2:1-6; John 16:23-33

May 21, 2017

Pastor Michael A. Morehouse

**Soli Deo Gloria**

1. Numbers 21:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Numbers 21:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Numbers 21:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Numbers 21:4b-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Numbers 21:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Numbers 21:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Numbers 21:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Wisdom 16:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Wisdom 16:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Numbers 21:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)