

Rogate (6th Sunday of Easter): May 14, 2023
“Whom to Ask?”

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

You all know the first commandment—You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. In the Large Catechism we confess, *“What is the force of this, and how is it to be understood? What does it mean to have a god? or, what is God? Answer: A god means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress, so that to have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe Him from the [whole] heart; as I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust be right, then is your god also true; and, on the other hand, if your trust be false and wrong, then you have not the true God; for these two belong together, faith and God. That now, I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god.”*¹

Whom do you ask when you need something? On this day in our country, we also celebrate Mother’s Day. What things do you ask your mother that you ask no one else? What about your father? Are there things you ask one but not the other? They both have the vocation of parent, but have been given different gifts by God to carry out those duties. Why do you ask one and not the other certain things? Is it not because you know you have a better chance of getting what you want, or need? In the church, the theme of the day is Rogate—the Latin word meaning “to ask.”

It’s not just children who ask, parents also ask. Usually when the parent asks, it is directed at something for our good. So, let me ask you question? How many of you have read through the book of Numbers in its entirety? It can be difficult for many to slog through the names; however, the names are only a small part of its importance. Numbers is vital for understanding the history of Israel and God’s constant gracious hand. Numbers records the history of transition from the death of the first generation in the wilderness and its replacement by the second generation. You remember that their punishment was to wander in the desert for 40 years and the only ones who were not children at the crossing of the Red Sea to enter into the Promised Land were Joshua and Caleb. Numbers brings us from the beginning to the end of the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

¹ Large Catechism, First Commandment, 1-3

As they wander, they are faced with the same question as Adam, Cain, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—whom would they ask? Who would they teach their kids to ask? Who is their God? Who would they teach by word and deed and pass down to their children? Is it the true God in whom their heart and trust is placed? As Christians read through Numbers, you should place yourselves in the first generation, knowing here you will wander and be tested, and recognizing the next generation is looking to your words and actions; they learn from you every moment of every day.

Most of us know the story of the bronze serpent, but we may not always remember the context of it. Israel was nearing close to the Jordan River. They could almost see the end of their wanderings. They had been through so much already, and all that stood in the way was Edom. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line, and they simply had to pass through Edom and they would be in the Promised Land—Oh Happy Day! Halleluiah!

But, someone get the Tylenol; God used Edom to test Israel's faith. He wanted them to know what was in their hearts, and to whom they really clung. Edom would not let them pass through the land, and so Israel had to take the long way around. They had to travel slowly and painfully down the mountainous west side of Edom back almost to the sea again, and then on up the eastern borders of Edom past the Dead Sea and to the crossing of the lower Jordan River. It was on this long journey that the first generation died, except for Joshua and Caleb. Our text begins with Israel leaving from Mount Hor.

This would take them away from the Promised Land, and it was not until they reached the lower tip of Edom could they travel northward again. The country in which they traveled is arid and barren. It was mostly a sandy waste with little vegetation and places with masses of rock and granite outcroppings. Instead of a land flowing with milk and honey, Israel found themselves with nothing but sandstorms, and manna.

This caused the people to become impatient, and their souls were too short for the long way. They began to forget God, and sought only the end. They forgot the importance of this day and daily bread. We see this in their grumblings, "***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.***"²

² Numbers 21:5

The worthless food they are referring to is manna; you know, the miraculous food God gave them every day out of His gracious hand! What God gave was no longer good enough.

What they sought to do was make a monster out of God. Instead of remembering His promise and His work done in Egypt; instead of remembering and passing down thanksgiving for safe passage through the Red Sea and forgiveness of sins through the sacrificial system; instead of remembering and passing down the blessed reality that God was leading them every day by a pillar of fire or a pillar of cloud; they taught God was a tyrant. They accused Him of being not just indifferent or uncaring; but they amplified it by accusing the Holy One of wickedness and that His intention all along was to kill them in the wilderness.

To remind the people a test was sent within the test – snakes are sent. Snakes should remind you of the serpent in Genesis 3; however, added to these snakes is a beautiful adjective – burning—in Hebrew “seraph.” You may recognize that word connected to a class of angels—the seraphim. The very description of these snakes teaches. Death was not God’s intention for Israel, for you, or for any of Adam’s children. Death is the result of sin. This is the test – unbelief always finds a reason for blaming God, whereas faith repents, acknowledges and confesses his or her sin, trusts in only One for salvation and hopes in only One for all good.

The people talked of dying in the wilderness, and now they are doing just that. They had complained of a long, slow death due to starvation and now they were getting a quicker death by fiery poison. If they were true to their own words, they should have been thankful for the fiery snakes and a quicker death. But what is in their hearts? Anger and fear. The sinful nature and the hard heart are a stubborn beast. Sometimes the rod of the Law must strike hard before people will admit their sin.

The Hebrew word for sin used in our text means “to miss the mark and to become laden with guilt.” They realized their own words and trust were misplaced and in their guilt they turn to Moses and ask, “Ask God to take away the serpents. Intercede on our behalf.”

Moses did intercede and God not only heard, but responded. His response is great, because it is also a test of faith. He doesn't simply take the burden away, instead He gives them His Word and sign. If they believed in His Word and looked to the sign, they would be saved.

Each one had to look for themselves. Parents couldn't believe for their children, but they could teach them properly. If one did not believe in the word and promise of God, they would not look to the sign and then continue to suffer in the consequence of their sin.

Now, two things must be said here. First, while they were saved from the poison of the snakes, they still had to take the long way around to get to the Promised Land. Second, the saving by looking at the pole would be a continual test. The bronze snake was kept in the possession of Israel for almost 700 years.

It first served as a reminder, but later turned to an idol. In 2 Kings, King Hezekiah destroyed the bronze serpent because people were burning incense and offering prayers in front of it. They were mixing the worship of the One True God with the gods around them. They started to abandon God's commands and turned again to their own words, "You worship your god your way and I will worship my god my way...Who's to say whose right and wrong, isn't all just a matter of personal opinion?"

What was being passed down from one generation to the next? In about 700 years after the destruction of the bronze serpent by Hezekiah, Jesus would become incarnate and be born in Bethlehem. Israel would again find themselves wrestling with the question of whom to ask, whom to trust. The Temple had two vastly different schools of thought being taught. Rome had many gods, and people were free to worship any god they chose in any way they saw fit. Rome, like the fiery snakes, had death in everything.

Jesus was born into this time, and He even teaches the true meaning behind the bronze serpent. In the context of the verse that many love and hold dear, John 3:16-17, listen carefully to the context. Jesus said, ***"If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might***

be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”³

God could have taken the serpents away by letting them all die suddenly. God could have sent Jesus to say, “Just do whatever you want. I am going to die for it anyway.” But He doesn’t; He does far more. He provides for the hearts of His people, and gives them what they need to be cured from more than the serpents bite – He gives them faith.

The object, the sign, of the bronze serpent finds its fulfillment in Jesus. The serpent Moses had to make was made of bronze, a reddish color. He wasn’t supposed to kill a snake and hang it on a pole; He was to make a snake which was similar in appearance to the fiery snakes, but without the poison. The bronze serpent had to be lifted on a pole and those who wanted to recover had to look upon it.

Consider how Jesus fills this! The bronze serpent was in the form of the snakes—Jesus was God in human flesh. The bronze serpent was without poison—Jesus was without sin. The bronze serpent was placed on a pole in triumph over the suffering as a symbol of victory over death—Jesus was hung on a cross in triumph over the suffering of all sin and victory over death for all mankind. Those who believed in God’s Word and looked to the bronze serpent in faith lived – those who believe God’s Word and look to Jesus as the only source of salvation live eternally.

The sinful nature, of course, has a problem with this. Reason, philosophy, science, human experience with snakes and poison all have no answer for why we suffer, why there is pain, why there is evil, or even a cure for death. Look to Jesus, here He is on the cross.

We see a dying man. I can’t look for you, I can only tell you how important it is to look. It is faith that sees this for what it really is – payment for sin and victory over death for you.

³ John 3:12-21

It didn't take 700 years after the death of Jesus for people to twist the worship of God into objects. Relics were taught to hold special healing power. People would pray to the bones of saints, or give adoration to pieces of the cross, or clothing of Mary or Jesus. Instead of reminders of His death, they were taught to possess saving works within themselves.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, how is your short soul doing on the long way? How often do we turn to seeking to blame God? How often have we heard, and perhaps, spoken the same words of mixing God with other gods; rejecting His Word, His Truth, for the sake of craftily spoken words full of deadly poison, seeking to give ourselves glory and turning God into a vicious, uncaring, wrathful, vengeful God who only seeks our destruction? How much mixing of God and ungodly things are being done and taught? When trials and suffering come, to whom do we ask? What is in our hearts? To whom do we teach others to ask? To whom do we look for all good?

There are times when we can see the end. We long for the short-cut and then we are told to go the long way. It is hard, and we can easily fall into despair. Irritation and impatience are easy traps, sprung quickly by the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. What can we do? Recognize your sin. Confess it. Look up. Look to the cross. Your God still provides.

If God so wills, there are many days yet on this earth for you to wander. While the devil prowls, the world taunts, and the flesh yearns—God provides. His gracious hand is open. He has poured water on your head, birthing you into His eternal family. The death of Jesus, His saving work, was washed over you, lavished upon you.

As you walk the long way, bearing your cross, see here the cross that is carried for you. Your earthly crosses, and burdens, are not yours alone to carry. You sit together with brothers and sisters in Christ, hearing God's Word and eating at the family table. The Fiery One who attempts to drown man in suffering and death is drowned in the blood of Christ, and in the midst of the little fiery ones sent to bite you, that same blood drowns them as you drink from the cup of life. A god is one from whom we can expect all good—here is proof, hung on the cross for your eternal good. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Prayer of the Church
Sixth Sunday of Easter (Rogate)
May 14, 2023

On Rogate Sunday, the Sunday of Prayer, it is customary to pray the Litany found in Lutheran Service Book pg. 288-289.

- L** O Lord,
- C** have mercy.
- L** O Christ,
- C** have mercy.
- L** O Lord,
- C** have mercy.
- L** O Christ,
- C** hear us.
- L** God the Father in heaven,
- C** have mercy.
- L** God the Son, Redeemer of the world,
- C** have mercy.
- L** God the Holy Spirit,
- C** have mercy.
- L** Be gracious to us.
- C** Spare us, good Lord.
- L** Be gracious to us.
- C** Help us, good Lord.

- L** From all sin, from all error, from all evil;
 From the crafts and assaults of the devil; from sudden and evil death;
 From pestilence and famine; from war and bloodshed; from sedition and from rebellion;
 From lightning and tempest; from all calamity by fire and water; and from everlasting death:
- C** Good Lord, deliver us.
- L** By the mystery of Your holy incarnation; by Your holy nativity;
 By Your baptism, fasting, and temptation; by Your agony and bloody sweat; by Your cross and passion; by Your precious death and burial;
 By Your glorious resurrection and ascension; and by the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter:
- C** Help us, good Lord.
- L** In all time of our tribulation; in all time of our prosperity; in the hour of death; and in the day of judgment:
- C** Help us, good Lord.
- L** We poor sinners implore You
- C** to hear us, O Lord.
- L** To rule and govern Your holy Christian Church; to preserve all pastors and ministers of Your Church in the true knowledge and understanding of Your wholesome Word and to sustain them in holy living;

To put an end to all schisms and causes of offense; to bring into the way of truth all who have erred and are deceived;

To beat down Satan under our feet; to send faithful laborers into Your harvest; and to accompany Your Word with Your grace and Spirit:

C We implore You to hear us, good Lord.

L To raise those who fall and to strengthen those who stand; and to comfort and help the weakhearted and the distressed:

C We implore You to hear us, good Lord.

L To give to all peoples concord and peace; to preserve our land from discord and strife; to give our country Your protection in every time of need;

To direct and defend our president and all in authority; to bless and protect our magistrates and all our people;

To watch over and help all who are in danger, necessity, and tribulation; to protect and guide all who travel;

To grant all women with child, and all mothers with infant children, increasing happiness in their blessings; to defend all orphans and widows and provide for them; to increase in faith and love those who celebrate their baptism anniversaries *Evonne, Richard, and Susan*;

to give health and peace to those who celebrate another year of earthly life, *Major, Denise and Helen*; To strengthen and keep all sick persons, *especially Zoey, David, Jeri, Pastor Small, Debbie, Pete, and those we name in our hearts*;

To comfort those who mourn, *especially the families of Maralee Kruse at the death of her mother and Helen Maddick at the death of her husband*. To guard and keep all young children; to free those in bondage; and to have mercy on us all:

L To guard and keep all young children; to free those in bondage; and to have mercy on us all:

C We implore You to hear us, good Lord.

L To forgive our enemies, persecutors, and slanderers and to turn their hearts; to give and preserve for our use the kindly fruits of the earth; and graciously to hear our prayers:

C We implore You to hear us, good Lord.

L Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,

C we implore You to hear us.

L Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,

C have mercy.

L Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,

C have mercy.

L Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,

C grant us Your peace.

L O Christ,

C hear us.

L O Lord,

C have mercy.

L O Christ,

C have mercy.

L O Lord,

C have mercy. Amen.