

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Second Sunday in Lent
March 1, 2026
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
Look and live.

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these miraculous signs you are doing unless God is with him.”

³ Jesus replied, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God! ⁶ Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be surprised when I tell you that you must be born from above. ⁸ The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹ “How can these things be?” asked Nicodemus.

¹⁰ “You are the teacher of Israel,” Jesus answered, “and you do not know these things? ¹¹ Amen, Amen, I tell you: We speak what we know, and we testify about what we have seen. But you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven, except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven.

¹⁴ “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

—John 3:1-17 EHV

Can you imagine the horror? The first grader who is playing outside of the tent comes in screaming. There is a snake latched on to his arm. You open the bassinet and this long-striped snake with big red blotches comes hissing out of the cradle at you. The baby inside is dead. Imagine the horror. Every place you go and everywhere you look there are people dying from an infestation of these poisonous, aggressive, and dangerous desert snakes. The pots in the kitchen have snakes. You step outside on the road, and they are around the poles of the tents. They are by water jars. Everywhere you go, everyone is dying.

And we know why they were dying, too. The Bible plainly says that God sent the snakes so that people would die. We see clearly what happens when the wrath of God is revealed against the godlessness and wickedness of people. Many Israelites died. So, why was God so angry? What did these people do that would bring such wrath from God on them? Do you remember the story? God through Moses led the people out of the land of Egypt. He rescued them from slavery. He saved them. When they needed food, he gave it to them. He supplied them with manna and quail; carbohydrates and protein. God had been with his people, leading them through the wilderness for 40 years. He cared for them. Their shoes and clothes never wore out. God blessed them in so many ways, and how did they respond? They complained. They grumbled. They didn’t like the way God was doing things. Grumbling and complaining poured from their lips. They sinned against their God, and God very vividly showed that **“the wages of sin is death”** (Romans 6:23).

Jesus uses that context to teach Nicodemus a valuable truth about sin and grace. He has an excellent illustration for sin when he referred to what happened in the desert with the snakes. Think about how a snake will bite a person, and then the glands that hold the poison simultaneously pump the venom through the fangs into the body. Sin is like the bite of the snake. It strikes us, but then it injects its venom into our system. It takes over the entire life of a person. Listen to these chilling words from James 1. **“But each person is tempted when he is dragged away and enticed by his own desire. Then when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin. And sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death”** (James 1:14,15).

We have countless examples of this in the Bible. Let me give you a few. Think of King David, bitten by a lust for Bathsheba, and then the venom found its way into his system. He committed adultery with her, and even murdered her husband, and then kept this sin to himself for almost a year. What did Adam and Eve do after sinning against

the Lord in the Garden? They foolishly tried to hide from God, and then Adam accused his wife Eve of leading him astray. He even blamed God for bringing Eve to him. Sin is so destructive to our lives. Sin brings death into the world. If sin is more like the bite of a venomous snake, then I need to have a cure that goes beyond the medicine we have in a first aid kit. I need a blood transfusion, a spiritual one, and so do you.

And that's exactly what Jesus was leading Nicodemus to see. Nicodemus essentially came to Jesus under the darkness of night to ask the question, "Who are you? We know you are a teacher. We know you are from God. We can see the miracles. So, I need to know, who are you, Jesus?" Jesus leads Nicodemus to see not only who he is but also what he came to do. Jesus uses the picture of the bronze snake to answer Nicodemus' questions. **"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."**

Do you remember the story? The people cried out to Moses and God, "We have sinned. Please help us." So, God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. And everyone who looked to that bronze snake lived. Jesus uses that picture to describe his work. Just as the snake was put on a pole, so Jesus was put on a cross. Listen to how this cure is described in 2 Corinthians 5 where it says, **"God made him, who did not know sin, to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him"** (2 Corinthians 5:21). The cure was so amazing because every sin ever committed was taken by Jesus upon himself. He became sin for us. He took the sin, paid for it, and removed it. He poured forth his blood, and on the cross Jesus cried out, **"It is finished!"** The cure was complete. Just like it was in the days of Moses. The Lord told Moses in Numbers 21, **"Make a venomous snake and put it on a pole. If anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will live.' Moses made a bronze snake and put it on the pole. If a snake had bitten anyone, if that person looked at the bronze snake, he lived"** (Numbers 21:8,9).

Just think about the connections that Jesus is making between the bronze snake and himself. First of all, many were bitten and faced death. You and I and all people have been bitten by sin and face death. Secondly, there is a simple remedy: look in faith. Trust the Lord and he will save. Thirdly, this is the only remedy. There is no other cure. This is it. Fourthly, there is no poison in the remedy. Even though God told Moses to make a venomous snake and put it on a pole, there wasn't any venom in it. There is no sin in Jesus. He has no venom. And finally, the remedy is complete. It actually worked.

So, God came to Moses and told him to put a venomous snake on a pole. That was God's way of saying that something has been cursed by God. This snake was going to be cursed by God. Put the snake on a pole, and anybody who looks to that snake is going to live. Trust the Lord and be saved.

Now just picture this with me. I'm thinking that not too many people thought that was going to work. Really, that's your solution to our dying problem? But you know, once in a while someone might say, "You know, this snake bite is killing me. God is telling me to look at the bronze snake and I will live. So, I will do that." And he looked and lived. He looked and lived because of the snake that was sent by God to be cursed instead of the people.

And what happens? He tells his friend, "Hey, look at that snake and you will live." And he looks and lives. And I'm imagining that the message starts to spread throughout the entire camp. They didn't text each other back then. They needed to talk to each other. The message is spreading throughout the camp, 2 or 3 million people. And one by one and group by group, they start looking and living. The man way in the back in the tribe of Reuben drags himself outside the tent so that he can get a little peek at the snake. He believes the remedy. He looks and lives. And all these people who are looking and living pop up off the sand, and they race to the tent, and they drag their children away from the video games to the snake. The children are kicking and screaming because they don't want to go to church because it's boring. "Yes, but you're dying. Look and live." And there in the middle of the desert is God's answer to the real problem of death. A cursed snake on a pole. **Look and live.** The old men looked. They young men looked. The old ladies looked. The young ladies looked. And the priests and Levites and the children, everybody looked and lived.

"If you want to understand my work," Jesus told Nicodemus, "think about that snake." How does Christian faith work? We're dying. We have no power to save ourselves. Our situation is hopeless. And God puts somebody into our lives, and we **look and live.**

Now it's not the looking that saves you. It's the one on the cross that saves. It's the Savior. God curses someone in your place. Instead of taking his holy wrath against us, he takes it out against the one on the pole, on the tree. Those who look *to him* in faith will live. My friends, we have a gracious Savior who has come to us so that we can look and live. It is the reason why we gather together at church. It is the reason we have a Christian elementary school and a Christian high school, so that we can look and live. It is the message of this congregation to the world that is dying. It's the reason we bring our offerings and ourselves. We want more people to look and live.

So, Jesus takes time to explain to Nicodemus just how this works. **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”** He’s the ultimate, only, and perfect solution to all kinds of death. Do you recall when we encounter Nicodemus next? He’s meeting with the Jewish Sanhedrin, defending Jesus. He’s no longer in the shadows. He is now a public follower of Christ. And then we see him at the cross, taking Jesus’ body off the cross and preparing it for burial. God brought him to faith in Jesus.

Nicodemus believed this. **“God so loved the world”** in this way: **“that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”** Look and live!

It’s not hard for me to imagine. I can imagine the father watching his son die from snake bite, writhing in pain, foaming at the mouth, burning up with fever. Parents are returning from the snake on the pole with their children perfectly cured. How foolish a father would be to not run as fast as he could, look up to the bronze snake and then see his child cured immediately! How foolish it is to disregard the truths that God gives to us in his holy Word! How foolish to look to all other things in this world to try to find evidence that God loves you!

His love is not found in how much you accumulate or how much you have. His love is not found in your feelings. His love is found on a cursed tree. It’s found in a Savior whose salvation is given so simply and so easily. Look and live. A love that is seen with outstretched arms. Look and live. Simple trust in God’s promises. Look and live. That promise is for you in Jesus Christ our Lord. Look and live. God so loved the world. God so loves you. Look to Jesus and live. Amen.