The Second Wednesday in Lent
Rolling Meadows -- 1981

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IN NOMINE JESU

Numbers 21: 4-9

Let no one imagine that MIRACLES automatically bring people closer to God. It wasn't so for Israel -- it wasn't so at the time of Jesus -- and it isn't so today! ..... Look for example, at the background to our text. There were all these miraculous events -- The Angel of Death passing over the Houses of the Israelites in Egypt which had the Blood of the Lamb sprinkled both on the doorposts and lintel while killing the firstborn of all the Egyptians (people, animals, everything) -- the miraculous escape from Pharaoah's pursuing army on dry ground through the Red Sea -- the miracle of the throwing of a tree (again symbolic of the Tree of Life) into the bitter waters of Marah to make it sweet so that they could drink and quench their thirst -- the miracle of the Manna fresh every morning from heaven.-- the miracle of the quail for meat. ..... But nothing satisfied -- nothing ever satisfied -- it was never enough -- they always wanted more!

So in our text we are told: "THE PEOPLE SPOKE AGAINST GOD AND AGAINST MOSES, 'WHY HAVE YOU BROUGHT US UP OUT OF EGYPT TO DIE IN THE WILDERNESS? FOR THERE IS NO FOOD AND NO WATER (and looking at the Manna said) AND WE LOATHE THIS WORTHLESS FOOD." You must understand that God the Creator -- alike any Father Who has Progenitored a child and has done so many marvelous things of His offspring -- God the Creator is not going to put up forever with that kind of rebellion and back-talk. "THEN THE LORD SENT FIERY SERPENTS AMONG THE PEOPLE, AND THEY BIT THE PEOPLE, SO THAT MANY DIED." The point is that if the Lord can't get your attention with His goodness and generosity, He will get

it with a baseball bat -- but sooner or later, for better or for worse -- you can rest assured HE WILL GET IT! And like any Good Father His objective is to bring us to our senses and turn us around in repentance so that we appreciate all He has done for us and ~~is~~ wants to be to us! "THE PEOPLE THEN CAME TO MOSES, AND SAID, 'WE HAVE SINNED, FOR WE HAVE SPOKEN AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST YOU; PRAY TO THE LORD, THAT HE TAKE AWAY THE SERPENTS FROM US."

and It is at this point that we come to the title of this sermon: THE CROSS TELLS THE STORY! Like any responsible "called and ordained minister" of God, "MOSES PRAYED FOR THE PEOPLE -- And the Lord said to Moses: "MAKE A FIERY SERPENT, AND SET IT ON A POLE; AND EVERY ONE WHO IS BITTEN, WHEN HE SEES IT, SHALL LIVE." ..... "SO MOSES MADE A BRONZE SERPENT AND SET IT ON A POLE; AND IF A SERPENT BIT ANY MAN, HE WOULD LOOK AT THE BRONZE SERPENT AND LIVE!" ..... Now Jewish tradition has it that that "Pole" was shaped in the form of a "T" or what is known to us as a "TAU CROSS" -- so that the "Bronze Serpent" could be draped across it. ..... And obviously it stood for the "TREE OF LIFE," for just to look at it meant "LIFE."

Of course, we see "life and salvation" coming from the CROSS OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST! There are many legends that HIS CROSS was cut from a "a tree grown from a seed or a branch of the tree of life." We read, for example, in the Liturgy of the Greek Orthodox Matins: "The Cross is the upholder of the universe.... the life-bearing plant.. ... and all quarters glorify it ... the pure Tree through which we receive the non-

mortifying food of Eden, glorifying Christ..... The Cross, equalling heaven in length and breadth, sanctifying all things with divine Grace." ..... The CROSS is and shall be the "Tree of Life" at Marah and Elim -- making "bitter waters" a refreshment. As St Paul says: "The Cross is the Wisdom of God" -- no human being would have ever thought of GOD ON A CROSS -- BRINGING LIFE OUT OF DEATH! Hence the CROSS is the "TREE OF LIFE" itself. ..... And so it is that THE PLACE OF DEATH becomes the "THE TREE OF LIFE!" JESUS CHRIST CRUCIFIED on the TREE OF THE CROSS is the UNITY OF THE UNIVERSE -- the place of refuge, the fruit, the anointing, the gift of everlasting life. ..... THE TREE THAT BROUGHT OUR DEATH (Genesis 3) because of a "Serpent" now becomes our SALVATION! A "NEW SERPENT" now hangs of the "Tree" -- and HE BRINGS LIFE!- His Name is JESUS CHRIST, SON OF GOD AND SON OF MAN! ..... THE CROSS TELLS THE STORY! ..... It is the "Tree" of the Cross -- the "life-giving wood" by which we are healed. ..... THE CROSS is the Symbol of the "TREE OF LIFE" -- the Symbol of "life through death" -- the Symbol of "salvation."

a Twig or Branch out of a Stump!

THE CROSS TELLS THE STORY! There is another Legend that the CROSS OF CHRIST rested on the "skull and bones of Adam" -- suggesting that as St. Paul said: "AS IN ADAM ALL DIE, SO IN CHRIST SHALL ALL BE MADE ALIVE." ..... As with the people in our text, the CROSS must never be separated from the Resurrection! The message is: "LOOK AND LIVE" -- "LOOK AT CHRIST ON THE CROSS AND LIVE" -- "I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE; IF ANYONE LIVES AND BELIEVES IN ME, HE SHALL NEVER DIE."

So it is that we continue to make the SIGN OF THE HOLY CROSS -- remembering the "TREE OF LIFE" upon which our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified -- and because "HE ROSE FROM THE DEAD" we shall "live with Him" -- how nothing ever again can "SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD, WHICH IS IN CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD" ------ ALL THROUGH THE the tree of the CROSS! THE CROSS TELLS THE STORY! ..... Remembering HIM and HIS BITTER PASSION and OUR BAPTISM INTO HIM we get up in the morning and we "make the sign of the Holy Cross (THE TREE OF LIFE) 'IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY GHOST." We re-confirm that we belong to God -- and nothing can take that away from us -- and we go out to confront whatever duties lie before us! Nothing can harm us now!

Hispanic Christians have what I think is an excellent custom to bless themselves and others. They FORM THE CROSS with their index finger and thumb keeping the other three fingers straight up to represent the HOLY TRINITY. The "Sign of the Cross" is then made on the "Forehead," another on the "Lips," and a third of the "Breast" --- and all the while they are saying, "By the sign of the Holy Cross, free us O Lord, our God, from all our enemies."

THE CROSS TELLS THE STORY! It doesn't look like much of a MIRACLE! You can pass it by in disgust --- "The Son of God on a Cross???" --- "Tell me another one." In our Pride it is certainly not the way we would direct it. ..... But for those who "look" and "believe" it is the "TREE OF LIFE."