

March 15, 2015  
Numbers 21:4-9

Lent 4B  
Snakes to Crosses

*Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our Lenten King. Amen.*

Grumbling, complaining, not knowing which way to turn. Sometimes even the closest of friends, family members, brothers and sisters in Christ can end up arguing and getting mad at each other. One can throw a painful, barbed dart at the other that is meant to hurt and to wound. Conflict, grumbling, complaining, break down of trust can happen when one is in a group of sinners. And isn't this what we face on in our world today, whether it be in our families, our churches, our workplaces, our schools, etc. You see complaining and grumbling is a sign of a deeper problem.

This is what was going on with the children of Israel. They were grumbling. If I was them, I would think...rightfully so. They've been wondering in the wilderness for forty years. They are on the brink of crossing into the Promised Land and here they are, being taken around an area of land where their enemies would not allow them to pass through. God was ultimately protecting them from another battle. They've already defeated some of their enemies, but now God is taking them on a longer route, so they revolt, they complain, they grumble. They are once again not trusting in Yahweh God.

Hear the words from our text again: <sup>4</sup> *From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way.* <sup>5</sup> *And 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 we loathe this worthless food."* <sup>1</sup> The people spoke against GOD and Moses!! They are loatheing the worthless food. The food that God is providing them. The gift that God is providing them, they are loathing. They are discontented, they are rebellious, and oftentimes "When a person's heart is intent on rebellion and beset by discontent, even the best of gifts from the Lord can lose their savor; nothing will fully satisfy until the heart is made right." Isn't that so true.

It's not just the Children of Israel that struggle with complaints, with grumbling, with a lack of trust in their Lord. It's not just the Children of Israel that grow impatient, rebellious and discontented. It happens to you and me as well.

It's the long car rides that bothered me, "Are we there yet?" "When can we get out of the car?" "Dad, my sister hit me." "Mom, Mike is being mean to me." Words my sister would say, probably not entirely true. Being stuck on a journey for a few hours or at points a couple of days can seem to be painful and lead to conflict, grumbling, and complaining. This is just a silly example of how one might grow impatient with someone.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (Nu 21:4-5). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

You see it happens in our relationship with each other and our relationship with God. We grow tired, impatient, perhaps even a bit hungry. Okay God, I've waited long enough, when are you going to give me someone to love? When is someone going to notice me? I'm tired of our government God, when are you going to send someone that has the same mind as me, that shares my values. If they aren't of the same mind and values, many times we'll step back and complain, perhaps to someone that doesn't agree with us and that hurts that relationship.

We grow impatient when things aren't going our way. Perhaps we've been praying a long time for one specific need, it could be for oneself as an individual or for someone else, but we really don't see God answering? When are you going to provide healing?

Perhaps in a community like this, there might be times that we ask...when is the seasonable weather going to come? When are we going to be out of this abnormal dryness, our livelihoods depend on it God? We all have something in our lives, that we tend to grow impatient with others and with God for. It's nothing new. The grumbling and complaining, that's not the real issue. The real issue is a trust issue. It's a sin issue.

The Children of Israel lacked trust in Yahweh, they didn't see the seriousness of their sin. They had even gone to the point of worshipping a golden calf. Now, I'm sure we haven't made a golden calf and worshipped it, but it happens to us as well. We worship other things as well. We also don't see the seriousness of our sin, we don't see our lack of trust in Yahweh, we don't see our mixed up priorities.

For the Children of Israel in this situation, they hurt God, they hurt Him pretty bad, and they would suffer because of their sin. They would endure consequences. God sent fiery serpents to them. God sent to them, venomous snakes. Snakes that hurt and snakes that killed. The fangs of the law were clamping down and the Children of Israel were dying for their sin.

Snakes are detestable creatures. I have a strong dislike for them. Actually one could say, I'm almost afraid of them. Yes, even the smallest snakes that just slither on the ground. They are slimy, slithery, and just plain creepy and crawly. I don't have like going into the snake house at the zoo. They just creep me out. Rightly so, Satan came in the form of a snake when tempted Adam and Eve. You see, snakes are deadly. About 250 species of snakes in the world can kill a person in one bite? That's what happened with mankind, they were killed in one bite of the snake, the serpent.

In our text, the Children of Israel are dying, because they were being bitten by snakes, fiery, venomous snakes. The law of God was becoming very real to them. The fangs of the law were biting down on them. It was biting hard and they were finally seeing the seriousness of their sin, and quite possibly for the first time, they truly repent before God. Our text tells us: <sup>7</sup> *And the people 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.” So Moses prayed for the people.<sup>2</sup>*

Dear family of God, when sin runs rampant in our lives as well, the only things that should happen to us is: death. The fangs of the law are tightening their grip on us. St. Paul writes to the Romans: “For the wages of sin is death.” And from our epistle for today: “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now in the work of the sons of disobedience...”

My dear fellow redeemed. When we repent, God relents. Israel repented, and God relented. He gave them a way out... <sup>8</sup> *And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”* <sup>9</sup> *So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.* <sup>3</sup> Notice God did not take away the snakes, God gave them life. The children of Israel had to look with eyes of faith at the very thing that was causing them death—the image of the serpent. Over 1 million people were running to the place of God’s grace.

Yet, God relented from disaster, God was granting them life, God is shown to be a gracious and merciful God, abounding in steadfast love.

We too look with faith to one that is lifted up for us. Hear again what we’ve been confession in our gradual during this Lenten season. *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.* <sup>4</sup> We too look with faith to the one that bears the consequence that we so rightly deserve. We, too, look with faith to the one that endured the cross, Jesus, our Savior. Jesus Christ uses this example in a conversation in our gospel lesson. Nicodemus is asking Jesus, how can a man be born again, he certainly can’t enter his mother’s womb a second time. The conversation continues and Jesus says, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believe in Him will have eternal life.”

Jesus is the Christ, the One who is lifted it up high on a cross. He is lifted high on a cross to save you from your sin. When you look with eyes of faith to the one that is lifted high up, you see a man that is broken and beaten, one that is whipped and wearied, one that is bloodied and bruised, one that is suffering and full of sin. When you look with the eyes of faith to the one on the cross you see the one who is suffering

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<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (Nu 21:7). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (Nu 21:8–9). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (Heb 12:1–2). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

the fullness of the fangs of the law. They seem to be almost clamping down and not letting go.

You see just as God provided life to dying Israel by means of a bronze snake lifted upon a pole, so also by means of Jesus Christ and him crucified, God give you eternal life, everlasting fellowship with your maker. And by looking at Him, who is crucified, you are looking with eyes of faith to what should have been your demise, but isn't, because Christ took your sin for you. He died so that you don't have too.

Even as we look towards the altar this morning during our season of Lent, we see the body of Jesus on the cross, but know this, Jesus didn't stay there, He wasn't meant to. The fangs of the Law didn't leave him there. The serpent did not win! His death and time on the cross was only temporary, temporary and painful, for He is alive. We give thanks to God that Jesus lives. We also give thanks that God doesn't grow impatient with us, but continues to give us good gifts. We give thanks that God continues to give us many blessings, even though we don't deserve them. We give thanks that God will never go empty on His promise, that those of us who look with eyes of faith to the Crucified and Risen Lord will never perish, and these eyes of faith are a good gift of God as well.

My fellow redeemed, during this season of Lent, we focus on repentance, we focus on the cross, as we look with forward to Easter, and look with even more eager anticipation to the final Easter, but yet we know Jesus is alive, and so are we as we have been crucified and raised with Christ in baptism. We have been born again by water and the word. We have been sealed with the cross, the very cross that held our Lord and Savior, who died, so that we don't have too. Our sin is laid to rest on Jesus on the cross, our eternal death died with Jesus on the cross, because of the full amount of God's grace and God's love for you and for me.

Fellow Saints of God, even as you see your sin laid on Jesus, the fangs of the law are still here, they aren't going away until Christ returns. As the fangs of the law bite at you and clamp down, know that you can run to the place of God's grace. The Children of Israel were 1 million strong and only one bronze serpent. If you think they could just look up at the bronze serpent on the pole after getting bitten by serpents, you don't appreciate how much space 1 million people take up. They had to run to the pole to see the serpent. They had to run with faith to the place where God promised grace could be found.

May we, too, run with faith to the place where God promised grace is offered to us, in His Holy Supper where we receive His body and blood, the very body lifted up on the cross, the very blood shed on the cross for you and me. It's here where we receive forgiveness of sins in all reality. And don't think the fangs of the law weren't clamping down on the youngest in the Children of Israel, run also to the font, where you have been marked with the cross of Christ.

No matter how impatient you get, or how much grumbling and complaining you do, God keeps his promises, God relents when we repent. You spoke those very words of confession and repentance this morning, know that God wipes away those very sins today! My fellow redeemed, because the fangs of the law and the serpent did not keep Jesus on the cross or in the tomb, know that at the final Easter, we all will know that death has been defeated, and the fangs of the law have no power over you who believe.

In Jesus Name, our Savior, the One Lifted up on the Cross for us. Amen.

*Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.*