

4th Sunday in Lent
March 10, 2024
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Numbers 21:4-9
Rethinking the Solution to Sin

Numbers 21:4-9 (EHV)

They set out from Mount Hor along the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom, but the people became very impatient along the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? Look, there is no food! There is no water! And we are disgusted by this worthless food!”

⁶The Lord sent venomous snakes among the people, and the snakes bit the people. As a result many people from Israel died. ⁷The people went to Moses and said, “We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord to take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed on behalf of the people.

⁸The Lord said to Moses, “Make a venomous snake and put it on a pole. If anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will live.” ⁹Moses 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.

Dear Friends in Christ,

The Lord brought the people of Israel out of Egypt and through the Red Sea by his mighty power just as he had promised. Within months, the people were complaining. They complained about the bitter water. God gave them good water to drink. They complained about the food. God sent quail for them to eat. He gave them bread 6 days a week on the ground, manna. They again complained about the lack of water and God gave them water from the rock. The Lord brought them to Mount Sinai and gave them the Commandments. But while Moses was on the mountain receiving the law from God, the people made a golden calf to worship. All this has happened in the first months after the exodus from Egypt. Even when God brought them to the edge of the Promised Land, they complained that the people of the land were too big and strong for them, that they should just go back to Egypt. So, the Lord decreed that they would wander the wilderness forty years until that generation of adults had died in the wilderness. Their children would be the ones to enter the Promised Land.

The forty years is almost complete when we arrive at the portion of Scripture before us today, Numbers 21. The next generation has learned from the previous one. They are also very good at complaining against the Lord. Listen to their complaints:

They set out from Mount Hor along the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom, but the people became very impatient along the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? Look, there is no food! There is no water! And we are disgusted by this worthless food!”

Serious Sin

Is this like a teenager standing in front of the open fridge, which is full of food, and stating in a loud, not so pleasant voice, “There’s nothing to eat in this house!” Are the people of Israel acting like a toddler who throws their plate of healthy food on the floor because he wanted cake? Maybe a little bit. God had graciously provided bread for the people six days a week for almost forty years now. On the one hand they claim, “There is no food!” On the other hand, they claim, “We are disgusted by this worthless food!” So, there is food. They just don’t like it anymore. They are ungrateful children of Israel.

What might a parent do when a child is ungrateful for the free food provided every day in their

homes? The teenager might be encouraged to get a job and buy the food they really like. Then they will find out why mom and dad don't always buy the most expensive items. The toddler might go without dessert until he stops throwing food on the floor when upset. The Lord's response to the complaints of his people is more serious than a life lesson or missed treat.

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Why such a serious response from the Lord? Because sin against the Lord is serious. Ingratitude towards parents is also sinful because the Lord gave us parents to care for us. But their complaints were against God directly and they took it a step beyond complaining about the food. They accused the Lord, the one who loved them and rescued them from centuries of oppression in Egypt, of devious desires. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?" They accused God of wanting to kill them in the wilderness. They were accusing God of evil, of sin, of not being good. This is serious and the Lord reacted to serious sin with an equally serious consequence – venomous snakes.

We know the passage from Romans: The wages of sin is death. Every sin is serious before God, especially complaining against the Lord and accusing him of being evil. We who are God's children by faith in Christ can also fall into such sin. When things in life are not going according to our plan, we may be tempted to complain to God. "Why do other people have the nicer things in life?" "Why is school so easy for that person and not for me?" "Why are my family relationships strained?" "Why are you letting me struggle like this?" "Why do you want me to suffer?" "Why are you hurting me, Lord?" "Do you enjoy seeing me in pain?"

Instead of sending snakes into our homes to remind us of the seriousness of our sins against the Lord, he sends the Holy Spirit through the law to convict us of sin and bring us to repentance. He did the same for his people in the wilderness.

⁷The people went to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord to take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed on behalf of the people.

The One we complain about is the only One we can turn to in repentance. Thanks be to the Lord for sending us his word to convict us of sin so that we turn back to him. Thanks to the Lord for friends and family who point us to the only Savior when we have sinned against God and against them. Thanks be to the Lord for hearing our prayers and pleas for forgiveness just as he heard the prayer of Moses. And finally, thanks be to the Lord for the solution he provides, a solution unlike any other.

The Solution to Sin

Ancient mythology gives us insights into the human way of dealing with spiritual things. Take the myth of Hercules as an example. Hercules did some really bad things and sought to be forgiven. He was given twelve labors to complete in order to atone for his past sins and achieve immortality. Some included slaying or capturing mythical beasts like the hydra or a three headed dog. Some involved acquiring precious, hard to find items like a belt and golden apples. One labor was true labor, cleaning stables in a single day. All of these labors were something no ordinary man could ever accomplish. They were amazing quests to be completed by a superhero.

Human ideas for acquiring forgiveness and immortality are quite different from the Lord's solution to sin.

⁸The Lord said to Moses, "Make a venomous snake and put it on a pole. If anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will live." ⁹Moses 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.

Look at a bronze snake and live. That's it. You don't have to crawl on your belly for a mile to prove you are repentant. You don't have to stand on your head for an hour to show you are worthy of being saved from the venom. Look at the snake on the pole and live. Trust God's word to Moses and you will live. No grand quest is necessary. In fact, there is really no effort on the part of the one bitten by a snake. Believe what God said and lift up your head to look at the snake. By faith you will be healed.

God's solution to sin finds its fulfilment in Christ. Jesus says in John 3: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." God's solution to sin is the sacrifice of his only begotten Son. He does not ask us to go on a great quest, but only to look to the cross of Christ and trust that Jesus paid for all sins. Look to the cross of Christ and trust that Jesus paid for my sins, yes, even mine. God's solution to sin does not depend on us one tiny bit but his solution to sin is for us 100%.

When complaints from in our hearts against God, look to the cross and receive Christ's forgiveness. When accusations against the Lord come from our lips, look to the cross and be assured that the Son of God paid for your sin. When doubts about salvation begin, look to the cross and be certain that his once and for all sacrifice was for your eternal salvation. Whether you are at the beginning of your time of wandering this earth or nearing the end, look to the cross every day and trust that your Savior is with you now and has done everything to ensure that you will be with him forever.

Amen.