

Look Up!
Numbers 21:4-9

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

There is a story of some folks who were fussing and grumbling. They fussed and they griped about everything. If it wasn't one thing it was something else. Soon the fussing turned to anger and then the people got really upset, complaining and picking on everyone else quickly changing the attitude of the group to criticizing. One group thought this, another thought that, and yet another thought they were all wrong and it should be this way. Soon the words became heated. The harshness of the comments spoken were like painful, sharpened arrows – intended to hurt and wound, to tear down and crush whomever they were aimed at. Of course as you would guess the outcome of this was predictable – there was offense taken, heated words were exchanged and trust and honor and respect was disregarded over hateful slanderous words until the whole community was about to tear itself apart. People that were supposed to be close –weren't feeling very loving anymore or comfortable in each other's company and the purpose of why they were together had been lost.

When I was speaking these words did a certain place, group or situation in your past come to mind. I really wasn't describing anything new, its is lived out in lives everyday. To talk about a group of people that squabbles and snips at each always constantly getting worse, could be in your family, in your home, in your work place, in a social club, in the church, anywhere a group of people meet. Fact of the matter is that conflict and disagreement with others is one of the common ties throughout human history.

The Old Testament Lesson speaks of a gripe session of a similar sort. The Israelites were wandering in the desert. Why were they wandering? - Because they refused to trust God's leading. They had been led right to the border of the Promised Land, but they were afraid to enter. They didn't believe God would guide them in as victorious people into the land he had promised them, instead they doubted and began to bicker and complain. And so they wandered in the desert. And that led to more fussing and fuming. And then they had their real mistake they started blaming Moses and more importantly they criticized God. Our text says, "The people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses."

The major sin of the Israelites in this was that they started to question God's authority and power, they dared to criticize God, to think they knew more than God. Their spirits were not faithful to God. They refused to trust God's love and care. They had so quickly forgotten the miracles God had done for them. In short, they were so focused on themselves and what

they thought was best that they begin to grumble and speak words that hurt – words that were harsh. It's bad enough to do this to another person, but these desert wanderers directed their words against God.

You think by now they would have learned their lesson. They complained while in captivity for over 400 years in Egypt and God saved them. They complained at the Red Sea, and God opened up the waters of the sea itself so they could escape. They complained that they had no food to eat, and God made Manna fall from the heavens everyday with the morning dew, all they had to do was collect enough for day each morning and they had food to eat enough for all. They then complained that they didn't have water to drink, and God made water break forth from the earth from a rock of the earth flowing until everyone's thirst was quenched. They complained later that they were tired of the water and manna and wanted meat to eat, and by now God was getting a bit ticked at them, so God answered their request by sending them meat, quails were blown into their camp, falling to the ground all around them, one days journey in any direction, three feet deep of dead quails. Imagine that scene, meat in abundance everywhere, and I mean everywhere so much so that diseases and illnesses sprung up amongst the people. But yet they still did not learn. Here again they are grumbling and complaining, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread and no drink! And we detest this miserable food!" And once again God responds to their complaining. "The Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people; and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died." Now they have something to complain about. Venomous snake bites are not pretty, their painful, burning, the skin gets enflamed, then the poison slowly spreads swelling up the tongue and making it hard to breath, until finally you just simply die. That would be something to complain about.

It sure seems clear in this story that the Lord was trying to send a message to the people. God wanted to show them that their rebellion, their complaining, their doubting was causing them to suffer. Many of them were going to early graves because of their transgressions. But also by sending snakes God was sending a reminder message to the people. Do you remember the way that story of how sin entered the world in the Garden of Eden? Was it just a coincidence? That first sin was a sin of rebellion, of disobedience, of thinking humans knew better than God. The tempter in the form of a serpent, tempts the first humans to eat of that tree and become "like God, knowing Good from Evil". And the punishment for that sin was that humans were cast out of paradise, no longer to walk with God, instead now they would face hardships and death itself. And now the complaining, God criticizing, wandering people were again being killed by the work of serpents.

And so just like so many times before and even the many times after, the people in the midst of their suffering realize they have sinned and turn back to God, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you {Moses}; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” And God in mercy heard the people and provided a way for them to be saved from death. He didn’t simply remove the snakes instead God tells Moses to do something quite odd. God told Moses to “make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live. And sure enough, those who trusted in God were saved from death by looking at the bronze snake that Moses elevated up on a pole in the midst of the camp, high enough for the hundreds of thousands of Israelites to look upon it and be saved from death.

So why did God just not take away the snakes from the camp? On the surface of it God’s solution just seems a little odd, God brought the snakes there just take them away and all would be safe. But then when you dig a little deeper it makes sense. God didn’t remove the snakes from the camp because the sin still remained with the Israelites. The consequences and opportunities were still in the camp. They were still being bitten – still felt the fiery poison. But what God did provide was salvation from death. This way God allowed the Israelites who trusted and believed to avoid perishing as a result of sin. God gave them the constant reminder of their salvation. No sophisticated snake serum. No amazing cure they healers could perform. No special liturgy or ceremony that the priests could do. No special shine guards that would stop the bite from getting to them. No anti-venom kit. No special path that would avoid the serpents. Instead God simply says, “Look at the snake and live.”

Not one of those things would help, only looking at it shall they live. Only by God’s grace are they saved. Likewise we know that we live in sin, amongst sin, it is coursing in our veins the poison is slowly spreading, and we shall surely die. But if we look to God and believe we know we will have salvation, not by how much we have in our stock portfolio, or done in charitable gifts, or said to the “right” people, but simple by the grace of God.

Jesus applies this well-known event to his own lifting up on the cross. He said, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever who believes in him may have eternal life.” This was why Jesus came into the world – to become the real salvation of the people - to be raised between heaven and earth on a cross. By dying this way, He would draw all people to himself. And just like God promised salvation to those who looked at the serpent on the pole – Jesus promises eternal life to those who trust and believe in the sacrificial power of the incarnate one who lays down his life for each of us. All those who look and believe will have salvation.

The bronze snake reminded the wandering Israelites of the profound depth of their depravity and of God's mercy and love. Our Cross is there to do the same for us. We need to have the Cross in our midst. It reminds us that through the Cross and the power of Christ we receive salvation. Our sins were carried to the Cross by Jesus, buried with Him in the grave – and His Resurrection Victory assures us of our eternal destiny as God's children. During this season of Lent remember each of you are bitten over and over again by the poisons of sin, look to the cross, and believe, look to Christ and live. Amen.

May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come.
AMEN.

Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus, and for all people according to their needs.

Heavenly Father We turn to the cross, and see the sinfulness of our lives, the pains and the rebellions that we have caused your heart as we over and over again have turned away from your will and your love. We look to that cross and see the love that you had for us, so much so that you were willing to send your own son to hang on that cross as our Sacrifice, so that we who believe might be washed clean of the sins and made new and righteous before you. We give you thanks for this great gift this day.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer

God almighty, with the cross always before us, may we see the glory of your grace. May all of humanity turn towards you and give thanks that you have forgiven us, and saved us. Continue to inspire us with the symbols of the faith, to draw us closer to you and to always see that

grace as the foundation of our faith so that we may grow in you into eternity. Inspire your Church to look towards your cross and be witnesses of your redeeming love. Use us as you will Lord, we are your servants, we are your church, we are yours unable to do anything without you on our side. Guide us as your faithful community this day.

Lord in your Mercy, hear our prayer.

God, Grant wisdom and strength to the nations of this world. Empower this world to feel the peace of your glory that flows out from your throne. May it sweep down to cover this world and wash away all pain and anguish, all suffering and disasters. May it end war and hatred. May it give peace and security to those who feel helpless and alone. May you continue to be with those facing hunger and diseases that kill so many people around the world this very hour. Empower your people to hear the cry of our fellow man, to reach out in Christian love and to give aid and support to those in need around the world and here at home in our own families and neighbors.

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer.

Almighty Lord, we turn to you in suffering and hurt. You are the great healer and comforter of all those in need. You give healing and hope, you give life and joy. Take away the pains and sufferings from all those dealing with hardships this day. Be with our shut-ins, the hospitalized and the lost and forgotten, be with us Lord and with all those we lift up in our prayers to you now...

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer

Into your hands, O lord we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.