

## My Faith Looks up to Thee

Numbers 21:4-9

One Sunday morning in Bible class, the teacher asked a woman to read from the Book of Numbers about the Israelites grumbling and complaining, while they wandered in the wilderness. And so she read from Chapter 11, beginning at verse 18: *“The Lord heard you when you wailed, ‘If only we had meat to eat! Now, the Lord will give you meat. You will not eat it for just one day or two days or five or ten or twenty days, but for a month, until you loathe it.’”* When the woman finished, she paused, looked up and said, *“Hey, isn’t that the Atkins diet?”*

Grumbling and complaining – it seems to be one of the Israelites’ constant sins throughout the days of their wandering in the wilderness. They were never satisfied with the Lord’s good gifts; ungrateful for God’s gracious providence. We see it once again in our text for today. Our text says that they had grown impatient on the journey, and began to speak against God and Moses. In fact, they were so discouraged with their situation, that they referred to the blessing of manna as ‘worthless food.’ And in Hebrew, the word means: ‘light or trifling.’ In other words, they were denigrating the good gifts of God as something that was ‘light and trifling.’

My friends, does that sound familiar? It’s not unlike our own ungrateful attitude. God sends us moisture and we complain that it’s too rainy. God sends us sunshine and we complain that it’s too hot and dry. God graciously provides us each day with food and drink, clothing

and shelter, family and friends. Yet, too often we exhibit our lack a thankfulness by an attitude of discontentment – a constant wanting for more. And that’s on the good days. On the bad days, when trial and hardship come our way, we seem to grumble the loudest and most bitterly, forgetting God’s promise that He will bring good out of the evil for the strengthening of our faith!

Where then, does this complaining, ungrateful spirit come from? Scripture reminds us that it comes from our stubborn, rebellious sinful heart. But specifically in our text it came from the people’s impatience with God. Keep in mind that the Israelites were now in the fortieth year of the wilderness wandering. They were nearing the end of their journey. Perhaps they were so close that they could taste it. So, when God told them they had to take a little detour around the land of Edom, they became impatient and started grumbling – not only against Moses, but also against God Himself. As a matter of fact, the word ‘impatient’ comes from a verb that means: ‘to be short’ – like a bed that’s not long enough to fit you. Now if you’re too tall, that can be very aggravating and you may get upset about it. You may lose your patience. It’s similar to our phrase, *“He has a short fuse, a hot temper.”*

Well, it’s not unusual, dear friends, for you and me to act the same way, when God puts little detours in our lives. Maybe our hours at work get cut back and we wonder how we’re going to make ends meet. Maybe that healing we prayed for doesn’t seem to come. Maybe that retirement dream has to be postponed, because of the economy. Maybe our relationships are shattered, because of some crisis in our lives, and we

don't know how to put things back together again. Sadly, when that happens, too often instead of patiently trusting in God's divine providence and plan for us, we blow a gasket. We not only get short with one another, we get short with God, and wind up despising His good gifts to us.

However, God is not deaf to our grumbling complaints. He clearly heard the ingratitude of the Israelites. And in order to jar them back to their senses, to bring them to a humble and penitent, grateful and patient attitude, He sent venomous snakes into their midst. The text calls them 'fiery serpents,' probably because their bite produced a burning, painful inflammation, which led to an agonizing death. This was God's way of showing them and us, that our sin is like a venomous bite that not only causes pain and turmoil in our earthly lives, not only creates a burning inflammation that eats away at our soul, but also leads to an agonizing eternal death in the fires of hell.

No wonder, then, that the Israelites immediately cried out for mercy. When they realized the error of their ways, they humbly came to Moses confessing their sins, and pleaded with him to intercede on their behalf. And notice how beautifully God responded! He didn't turn a deaf ear to their cries for mercy, but poured it out in abundance. He didn't light up the fuse of His anger and destroy them. Instead, He immediately provided a way of escape. For the moment that Moses prayed, God told him to fashion a bronze serpent and put it on a pole, so that everyone in the camp could see it. And all those who looked up to it in faith, would instantly be healed and live.

Dear friends, what wonderful glimpse that gives us into the gracious heart of our loving God. For as Jesus pointed out in our Gospel lesson for today, this story is really a foreshadowing of His saving grace. In the words of Christ: “AS MOSES LIFTED UP THE SERPENT IN THE WILDERNESS, SO MUST THE SON OF MAN BE LIFTED UP, THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM MAY HAVE ETERNAL LIFE!” What a gracious promise to you and me and all mankind. God does not turn a deaf ear to our cries for mercy. Nor does He pour out His burning anger upon us. Instead, He sent Jesus to be lifted up on the pole of the cross, so that we might be healed of our sin and live. The cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, poured out to us in our Baptism, is the antidote to the venomous toxin of our guilt and iniquity.

For just as Moses prayed for the Israelites and they were spared, so Jesus Christ not only prayed for us, but lived and died for us that we can be spared from eternal death and condemnation. As a matter of fact, in our text the verb ‘pray’ literally means: ‘to intervene or interpose’ – like placing yourself between the victim and the danger, so that they can be saved. Well, that’s exactly what Jesus did on the cross. He placed Himself between us and God’s righteous anger, and took the full brunt of it, so that we have been saved from sin, death and hell.

Rev. Deane Schuessler describes it this way: *“When I was a Boy Scout I learned about First Aid. I was interested to learn about what to do if a snake bit someone. First, we were taught to take a knife and make an X-cut over the top of the wound. Then we were taught to suck out the poison from the wound and spit it out real fast, never swallowing it. But*

*what would happen if we swallowed the poison? That's right. We would die. In the same way, what would happen if our sins weren't forgiven? That's right. We would die eternally.*" But that's the whole reason why Jesus died on the cross – to rescue us from sin, death and hell.

That may, in fact, explain the curious reason why God chose a serpent on a pole as the means of Israel's rescue. After all, a serpent is the normal symbol for Satan, the author of sin. And yet, it is Jesus who is the Author of our rescue and salvation. But at the cross, He took upon Himself all our sin and shame, all the evil of the evil one, in order to wipe it out for good. That's what Martin Luther was getting at, when he suggested that the reason the serpent was fashioned out of bronze or copper, a metal of a reddish hue, was to represent the reddish inflammation caused by the serpent's bite. But even more so, it represents the red color of the blood of purification, in particular Jesus' blood that purifies you and me from all unrighteousness!

Of course, all of that is received only as gift through repentance and faith in Christ. The only way the Israelites received their healing was by looking at the bronze serpent. Likewise, only when we look at Jesus with the eyes of faith are we cured of the venom of our sin. For as we sang in our Sermon Hymn: *"My faith looks up to Thee, O Lamb of Calvary, Savior Divine."* Only faith in Jesus Christ can save us from sin, death and hell. And thankfully God provides us with that gift of repentance and faith, by the power of His Spirit in His Holy Word.

You see, the Holy Spirit is constantly working to turn us away from our sin and back to Jesus Christ. You'll recall that the event in our text

took place in the fortieth year of Israel's journey. They were so close, and yet many of them missed out on the promised rest. All those who refused to repent and look up to the pole in faith missed out on the promised-land. That's why Scripture condemns the false doctrine of 'once saved, always saved.' It is possible for us to lose our faith and miss the promised land of heaven. If we refuse to repent of our sin and look to the cross of Christ with the eyes of faith, we will be lost. But thankfully, the Holy Spirit is always working in the Word and Sacraments to prevent that from happening, to bring us to repentance and forgiveness, in order to keep us strong in our faith to the very end. And that's why it's so crucial that we regularly and frequently avail ourselves of those precious Means of Grace!

Recently I read the heart-warming story of Zoey the Chihuahua, who saved the day by jumping between 1-year-old Booker West and a rattlesnake back in July of 2007. Little Booker was playing in his grandparents' birdbath in Loveland, Colorado, when the rattlesnake struck. Zoey intervened and took the snake's bite. The brave little dog survived, and both the boy and the dog are doing fine.

That wonderful story gives us just a little glimpse into what Jesus did for you and me. He is the One who intervened on our behalf, and put Himself between us and the deadly bite of sin and Satan, death and hell. Jesus was lifted up on the cross, so that through the eyes of faith you and I could be healed on the venomous bite of our sin. But just as Zoey's owners love to tell others about her heroic act, so we are called to share the Good News of Jesus' saving act to others, in order to multiply His

healing forgiveness to a hurting world. May God help us not to keep that gift to ourselves, but to look for opportunities to witness and share the Gospel, so that others too might look up to Jesus and live. For His name's sake. Amen.