

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 18, 2012

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke

Numbers 21:4-9

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people. The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived. (NIV)

About twelve years ago during my Seminary training year as a vicar in Sioux Falls, South Dakota we walked through a big snake exhibit. I remember looking at and reading about the eastern brown snake which is said to be the second most venomous snake in the world. 1/14,000 of an ounce of its venom is enough to kill an adult human and this snake is capable of injecting several ounces in one bite. As I was reading this I noticed a sign on the cage that read "feeding time for this snake at 2:00pm." I glanced down at my watch and it was 1:59pm. So I stood there and watched. As a man opened a sliding back door he was not expecting the snake to be right at the door. He certainly wasn't expecting the snake to spring out of his cage right at him. You could sense and see the panic as for the next minute this guy was dancing faster than I've ever seen any man dance. He was frantically using this metal stick to try and grab the snake. When he finally got it he threw the snake back in the cage and closed the door. I don't think that snake got lunch that day.

After all, who would want to get bit by a snake, especially a venomous snake? On almost every top ten list of things that people fear snakes usually make it on the list. All the way back at the beginning of time the devil used a snake which was called more crafty than any of the animals God had made. That is why it is a harsh reality for us to consider that like the children of Israel in the desert we are: **Snake bitten!** For like the Israelites **we are snake bitten sinners.** But then I pray we also remember, like He did for the Israelites, God has provided a way to save us. May we rejoice in the truth and bask in the love of our God as we recognize: **Christ was snake bitten to save us sinners.**

Imagine making a long and difficult trip home. You get so close you can almost see your house but the road is closed and a big sign says detour. You have to turn around, go back, and go all the way around another way. Would that make us a little angry, a little impatient? Think of the Israelites who have been traveling to the Promised Land for nearly 40 years. They had been right on the brink of entering the land when, instead of trusting God's promise to deliver it into their hands, they listened to the ten spies who reported the people there were far too powerful for them. Because of their

disobedience and lack of faith, God said that no one over the age of twenty would enter the land, with the exceptions of Joshua and Caleb. But now a new generation of Israelites are about to enter the land. All they had to do was go through Edom and they will be there. One problem, however! Edom refuses to let them go through. The Edomites say they will draw the sword against their own relatives if they try to pass directly through their territory. So once again Israel is sidetracked, detoured back and around.

We read: ***“They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!’”***

This new generation is very much like the old. They get impatient and upset. They start to speak against God and against Moses. Their complaining is downright ridiculous. It is downright sinful. How can they ask God why He brought them out of Egypt? They had been enslaved and treated miserably for over 400 years in Egypt. The Egyptians made the Israelites kill their own firstborn sons. They made them work like dogs. They had cried out to the Lord and the Lord heard their cries. So God miraculously rescued them with His mighty hand.

How could they say there was no bread? God sent them bread from heaven, manna to sustain them every day of their journey and quail from heaven. God saved them from starving with this food they now detest and call miserable. How could they say there was no water? How many times did the Lord provide to quench their thirst, even giving them water from a rock? All they had to do was take a look at their sandals to see how God took care of them. God miraculously kept them from wearing out. Just recently God delivered them from the King of Arad who tried to destroy them. They should have been on their knees thanking God for preserving them in the wilderness on their way. But instead of focusing on all these blessings and the great covenant the Lord had made with them, they become impatient. They don't trust the Lord. They grumble against Moses. They grumble against God.

“Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.” The Lord knows when and how to discipline His wandering children. So the Lord sends poisonous snakes. As people are dying this punishment does what God intends. The Israelites realize what they have done. The people confess to Moses: ***“We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.”*** The people recognize they are snake bitten sinners. They need God's help. Again they are in need of God's rescue.

It is easy to read accounts like this and point our fingers at the Israelites, isn't it? We wonder how they could be so ungrateful, so ignorant, so stubborn and sinful after all God did for them. But are we really any better? What have we complained about recently? I tried to think about how many times over this last month or so I have grumbled about the gas prices. Then I tried to think of how many times I thanked God that I actually have two vehicles which get me places to fill with gas. Like spoiled children don't we too often complain and grumble – about our food, about our funds, about our health or jobs. We complain even about little things at times. Who is all our complaining and grumbling really against? Is it not against God who provides all that we need for body and soul? Our impatience, our lack of trust, our complaining, & our grumbling is sin against God - sin that makes us worthy of death and sin that deserves

punishment both now and eternally. I pray, as we read this account, we see and confess that we too, like the children of Israel, are snake bitten sinners.

The Lord could have just let these rotten people die in the desert just like He could let us die in our sins. But the Lord does something else. As Moses intercedes for the people, the Lord answers Moses' prayer. The Lord said: ***"Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live. So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived."*** Just try to put yourself into what was going on here. Venomous snakes all around you biting and striking. People are dying. Now you look over and Moses in obedience to the Lord's command is making a bronze snake and is putting it on a pole. Sounds pretty crazy, doesn't it?

But by pure grace this is the way out the Lord provided. To live the people simply needed to trust – to look up at that bronze snake and live. The bronze snake had no power in itself but it was the Word and promise of God that gave it such power. Faith in God's promise saved them. These words leave open the possibility that some, hardened in unbelief, refused to look. They didn't like or believe in this solution to save them. But we are told those bitten by the deadly snakes that looked, those who believed God would save them, lived!

The comparison of how God saved these snake bitten sinners and how God saves sinners like us is so similar and clear. In fact, Jesus tells us: ***"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."*** We are snake bitten sinners living in a world filled with snake bitten sinners. People are dying all around us. But God has provided a way and only one way out. What God did still sounds pretty crazy. He sent His Son to take our place to live a sinless life without any grumbling or complaining along the way. God placed all our sins on Jesus as Jesus was lifted up on a cross. Jesus laid down His life as a sacrifice for all sin and took His life back up again to win our salvation. Now all who look at Jesus in faith live. Now all who have water applied on them in the name of the Triune God, all who come up to this table to eat this bread and wine, body and blood, have forgiveness of sins. Why? Because we too have the Word and promise of God! It is His power that saves us through faith in such promises.

I go back to the question I asked earlier: who would want to get bitten by a snake? In love for us Jesus did. He willingly went as God promised Adam and Eve to be bit on the heel by the devil. On the cross Jesus was snake bitten and injected with the most deadly venom – sin – sin that separates from God – sins that destroys eternally. But by being snake bitten on the cross and rising again on the third day Christ saves snake bitten sinners. Jesus crushed the devil's head and defeated even death and hell. Dear friends, isn't this enough to change our grumbling into thanks and our complaining into praise? Isn't that more than sufficient reason to place our trust in the Lord! When we put our faith in Jesus we have nothing to fear, not even the most venomous snake of all! Amen.

