

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21
The Venomless Snake

First they wanted out of Egypt. Then they wanted out of the wilderness. Then they wanted back into Egypt. First they wanted in on the covenant. Then they wanted out on the covenant. Then they wanted back in. First they wanted manna. Then they didn't want manna. Then they wanted quail. Then they didn't want quail. First they wanted the true God. Then they wanted a golden calf. Then they wanted the true God again. First they didn't want Moses. Then they wanted Moses. Then they didn't want Moses. Then they wanted Moses again. And so on, and so forth.

Complainers, weren't they? Thank God we never act like that. Thank God we are always content with our daily bread and God's Word. Thank God we never whine and moan about what God has or hasn't given us or how he has or hasn't given it to us. Thank God we have never told God we would never ask for anything again if He did this one thing just to ask for a million more things later. Thank God we've never turned our back on God and ignored the warnings of His just to groan to Him when what He warned us would happen happened: "How could YOU let this happen to ME God?" Thank God we have never been cured of a sickness and fallen away again a few weeks after bargaining with God for our lives. Thank God we always simply own up to our sins and failures and live contentedly with the consequences.

Everyone is gathered around the Christmas tree, eagerly waiting to open presents. You are the most excited of all, not because of what you are getting, but because of what you have given. You can't wait to see the look on your loved one's face when he or she opens the present. You worked hard to get this present. You put a lot of thought into it. It is something your loved one needs and will enjoy. Finally, there is no way this one can backfire, there is no way you can mess this up. You've given your loved one the perfect gift. As he or she unwraps it you almost want to giggle. You can't wait for your loved one's eyes light up when he or she realizes what it is. You are already picturing your loved one beaming and running over to you with a hug and a kiss of gratitude. Then your loved one opens the present. "Oh," he or she says. "That all?"

God had given Israel gift after gift. Even more, he had given them gift after gift after they grumbled and disobeyed and betrayed Him. Each time they came back begging for help, He had shown mercy and given them what they needed. Now, don't get me wrong. There were consequences for their sins. But each time He welcomed them back as His children, forgave them, and urged them to walk in that forgiveness. Yet each time, they eventually managed to mess up bigger, taking for granted the undeserved gift He had given them in their self-made desperation a short while earlier and complaining they deserved more. "Oh. That all?"

And our house is too small. Our job is too thankless. Our food is too bland. Our school is too pointless. Our marriage too much work. Our church is too boring. Our pastor is too handsome. We have too much of this and not enough of that. We used to want this and now we want that.

It is easy to complain. It is human nature, because there is grass on the other side of the fence and a car in the next garage. It is human nature to complain, but human nature must often be sucked out of our system like venom and replaced with the Body and Blood of our Lord, the crucified God-man lifted up for our salvation.

A serpent slithers through small openings. The Israelites couldn't chase the snakes away and their bites made their flesh red, on fire with the poison of ingratitude. The snakes came from every side and bit them all over their bodies. Imagine the horror. How could they sleep? How could they protect themselves, let alone their children and elderly? But they didn't want God, so God let them have the alternative: the ancient serpent and the stinging bite of sin.

So also the devil and our flesh slither through the smallest of openings in our lives to assail us from every side with temptations. Our passions burn and, when stung, guilt reddens our face. Our first impulse is

to try to treat the wound ourselves, but the fact is that sin can't be fixed, it can only be forgiven. In fact, many times our frantic attempts to heal the wounds of sin ourselves only make things worse.

I'll never forget the day the WWF died in the Johnston household, never to be allowed again. "Superfly" Jimmy Snuka was the man and my friends and I were in the middle of a royal rumble. "Superfly" Jimmy Snuka jumped off anything he could find, and, well, we were the impressionable type. Someone jumped off the rocking chair, a plant fell over and dirt went everywhere. We panicked. First, we got a wet rag. Now we had mud. Then we decided to vacuum. Now we had mud driven down deep into the carpeting. Then my mom came in, my friends scattered, my brother pointed at me, and I braced for what I knew I deserved. I'd tried to fix things and only made it worse. There was only one thing I could do: I pled for mercy.

Many times people come into my office in the hopes that I can fix their lives. As they begin to recount whatever events brought them to me, it often quickly becomes clear that more importantly than their lives, they need to be fixed. They are broken and contrite spirits. Without directly saying the words, they have already really confessed the problem. When they finish talking and wait for my sage advice, I hit them with it: "As a called servant of Christ and by His authority, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Almost to a man, that is when the tears really flow. They knew the real problem. They knew there was no easy fix. They knew they had turned away from God and their only hope was to turn back. By God's grace, they now knew that God was waiting with open arms, eager to forgive. Are there still consequences for the sins forgiven in my office when the person leaves? Yes. Similarly, the Israelites surely had to nurse their wounds and regain strength after being healed by looking at the snake. But the biggest problem was solved. The snake was overcome. So also, in God's absolution, the biggest problem is solved. Sin and death are overcome.

When God wanted to heal those bitten by venomous snakes he lifted up a snake, one that appeared venomous as well, but which nonetheless worked healing. When God decided to heal those poisoned by the venom of sin, which is death, He lifted up sin, who appeared a sinner in every way, though He Himself was surely sinless, so that sin would be paid for and sin's venomous teeth—death—smashed. Israel could do nothing to heal themselves but look to that snake and trust God's promise of mercy. We can do nothing but look at His crucified Son and trust His promise of mercy. We have been bitten by sin. We are destined for death. Our only hope is that sinner on a pole who takes our place under God's wrath and whose innocent yet crucified Body and Blood is the only antidote for our condition.

Israel did a lot of things wrong, including despising God and His messenger, but they eventually did one thing right. They realized they were lost and pleaded with God's messenger to beg God's forgiveness. God granted forgiveness, and, even though there were consequences to their sin, their relationship with God was restored. The sad fact of the Old Testament, however, is that with each fall into sin, Israel became less and less inclined to do that one thing right, to beg for God's forgiveness. The same is true today. The Son has been lifted up for all to see and be saved. Trust the Father's promise that by the Son's wounds you are healed. But beware of turning away again, because while God is always ready and willing to forgive, we are less and less ready and willing to confess. God's love in Christ is too great and too important to take your eyes off of it. The Son is crucified. The serpent is overcome. You are healed. Leave your grumbling at His feet and exchange it for enduring gratitude lived out through the good works that God in His grace has prepared in advance for you to do. *"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."* Amen.