

Numbers 21:4–9

⁴ 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. ⁵ The 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!” ⁶ The LORD sent venomous snakes among the people, and the snakes bit the people. As a result many people from Israel died. ⁷ The 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. ⁸ The 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.” ⁹ Moses 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.

Sermon for Lent 4, March 10, 2021 St. Paul’s Green Garden, MI

Text: Numbers 21:4-9

Theme: “Some Things Never Change”

It was hatred, hatred of a most vicious kind. The younger brother loved God. Out of his love he offered his Lord the firstborn of his flocks in sacrifice. The older brother hated God. His offerings were a formality. As far as the older brother was concerned it was a waste of time. What’s more, God had made it very clear that Cain’s offering was not pleasing to him and that his younger brother’s was. Cain so hated God that he murdered his brother.

Centuries later, after Christ’s ascension, the apostles preached and taught about Christ’s sacrifice for our sins. But many throughout the Roman empire hated them. Eventually the hatred was so great that many of the apostles were put to death because they loved God and proclaimed Christ. Because of hatred they lost their lives. Some things never change.

About 1500 years before Jesus was born God released the descendants of Jacob from four centuries of slavery in Egypt. No sooner had they left Egypt than they found themselves between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea. Instead of trusting in the Lord who had protected them and blessed them in the past they gave in to fear and began to complain.

Today we are sometimes apt to complain about food, funds or fashion that we think are inadequate or not to our liking. We may complain that this pandemic is getting old, and how much longer are we going to have to wait to get a vaccination. And we, too, fail to remember that a gracious God provides for all

our daily needs. Some things never change. Whether it is hatred and murder of fellow human beings or complaining about God's blessings, sinful human nature has not changed.

Today we encounter the Israelites in the wilderness. Within a short time they would enter the Promised Land of Canaan as God had told them. Did they look forward to it with grateful anticipation? Did they look ahead in faith, believing God would not deny them? Far from what God wanted they complained—so bitterly that God had to discipline them. Some things never change. 1. The sinful nature is frequently ungrateful. 2. Yet God always remains faithful.

Israel had recently suffered some setback. They were at the end of 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. They were nearing the threshold of the land of Canaan. Shortly before this, Aaron their High priest had died, and they had mourned him. Another setback probably served to discourage them even more. The nation of Edom had refused to allow Israel to travel through their territory on the way to Canaan. Israel now had to take the long way around. We can understand how discouraging this was for them. And they, for their part, focused more on the setbacks rather than on God who always had and would continue to lead them.

They had forgotten all the blessings God had provided for them. While they had wandered for the forty years in the wilderness, God had never once left them. They forgot he had always provided for their needs of food and water, frequently providing for them through miracles: water from a rock, sweetening bitter water with the branch of a tree, daily providing manna for their nutritional needs. They had frequently complained when they believed God was not providing for them. They also forgot that their loving, protecting God had recently given them a great victory over an enemy people who had launched an unprovoked attack on them.

It is our sinful nature that reacts poorly when circumstances are not ideal. In this case Israel grew impatient; literally their souls were short. They were irritated and put out with God because of the circumstances they had to endure. Some things never change. Under trouble and trial **“The 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!”** The miserable food they were complaining about was God's gift of manna. The Hebrew suggests that they considered this miraculous food little more than starvation rations.

Their complaining against God's gifts was essentially the same as spurning his grace and mercy. He gave all his gifts to them because of his mercy. He had promised to send the Savior to the world through their nation. His protecting care for them in the wilderness was a part of his mercy and grace. Yet they complained

about God's material blessings and in effect were rejecting his spiritual blessings as well. Some things never change.

Our sinful nature is still ungrateful. That means you and me as well. We often fail to focus on God's blessings and instead we complain. Instead of being grateful for warm houses with efficiently operating furnaces we often complained when bitter cold weather hit us during part of this winter. At times we have been dissatisfied and ungrateful if we didn't have a better TV or car or something else that we believed we should be able to have but were unable to afford. And how often haven't we allowed the Lord's work to go wanting while we indulged our selfish desires?

Some things never change. Our sinful nature is frequently ungrateful. Sociologists, psychologists and those who study the history of human origins would have us believe that people are getting better and better all the time. Not so! We really haven't changed since the first sin, and since the time of the ancient Israelites. How grateful we can be that God and his message has never changed either. While human beings frequently are ungrateful, God always remains faithful.

In this case with the Israelites God showed his faithfulness by disciplining his ungrateful children. He sent venomous snakes among them to bite them so they got sick and many began to die. The KJV and the Hebrew call them fiery snakes. Travelers in the area in modern times have reported seeing snakes with a fiery red appearance, but it seems clear that these were snakes whose bite was also fiery in that their bite was poison. Many Israelites died from those bites. God's discipline then caused his people to lean on his mercy and love once more. **The 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. They could not depend on themselves. Though they had probably found natural remedies to relieve common ailments they had no cure for the bite of these snakes, and no cure for their sin. They had to depend on God.

And the Lord again displayed his unfailing mercy toward his people yet another time. **The 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."** God wanted his people to enter Canaan and settle it. He wanted to fulfill his promise of a Savior through their nation. The word LORD in verse eight is God's Savior name, the name that indicates he is faithful to all his promises.

God told Moses to make a bronze replica of the snakes that were biting the people and anyone who looked at the bronze snake, believing in God's promise, would live. God's remedy called for faith. The cure was in God's Word and

promise, not in the bronze snake itself. Without God's Word and promise the snake would have been nothing more than an idol. Notice, also, that the Israelites made no contribution to their cure. God cured them by his grace and power. But even better than that, his cure was evidence of his forgiving mercy and love.

The Israelites true ailment was not merely the deadly bite of a certain species of snake. They had been afflicted at birth with the deadly bite of sin. They needed forgiveness. We have the same need. What a blessing that some things never change.

Though we in our sinfulness are often ungrateful, God is always faithful. He promised to cure his people if they would look at the bronze snake, believing his promise. That means they had to trust not just his promise of a physical cure. God wanted them to trust in his promise of forgiveness as well. God gives the same promises to us.

In Holy Communion, in baptism our Lord offers us the pledge of his promise even when we are faithless, complaining and ungrateful. In baptism he offers us his promises through a washing with water and his word. What a wonderful picture we have in the water of that which God actually does through his word when he washes us clean from all sins. What a wonderful and regular assurance our Lord offers us in Holy Communion when he gives us Christ's own body and blood. It is his pledge to us that Jesus' sacrifice paid the ransom for our souls. We are not guilty before God. Yet, how grateful we can be that some things never change.

Once a man, who, for many years, had been a faithful believer in God had lost his faith for a time. He shamelessly murdered his lover's husband to cover up his sin of adultery. When his pastor confronted him, he could not hide his sin against God. He repented. The prophet Nathan assured King David that God had forgiven him.

Centuries later an unbelieving tax collector had over charged countless people so he could indulge his greed for things. No one liked him very well because he was so greedy. But he had noticed how Jesus loved people. When Jesus came to stay at his house and showed him how God had forgiven him even for the loveless way he had treated people, Zaccheaus repented and received God's forgiveness. You probably have a story or two of your own that you could tell about your sins and how the burden of sin weighed you down. But thanks be to God that though the fact of our sins doesn't change, God does not change his promise of forgiveness and mercy. It is always the same. And it will never change. Amen.