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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749

Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
April 6, 2014
5th Sunday in Lent

Scripture Lessons: Hebrews 4:14-16; Passion: Jesus Is Crucified

Hymns: 155; 153; 144; 172:8 (248:1-3)

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Numbers 21:4-9

Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. 5 And the people spoke against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread." 6 So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. 7 Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

8 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." 9 So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

(NKJV)

This is the Word of God!

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, our Crucified Savior, dear fellow Redeemed.

INTRO: Rebellion and Repentance

Our text this morning records an incident that took place while the children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness, This nation of almost three million people brought this upon themselves because they rebelled against the Lord, refusing to cross over into the promised land which the Lord was ready to deliver into their hands. They were sentenced to forty years of wandering, one year for each of the days the spies had spent in Canaan.

Our text reports yet one more incident of rebellion and complaining against the Lord near the end of the forty years, after most of the original adult population that had been delivered from Egypt had died. Now the next generation, those who had been children at the time of the exodus or had been born in the wilderness, made up the adult population, and we still see the spirit of rebellion in their hearts. What we know best about this incident is how it ended, with Moses raising that Bronze snake on a pole.

So today, on Passion Sunday the Holy Spirit reveals –

THEME: Moses and the Bronze Snake as a Picture of Salvation in Christ Crucified.

What was their great sin of rebellion? It is seen in their –

I. Despising the Bread from Heaven.

Listen and hear how things got out of hand.

Numbers 21:4-5 Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. 5 And the people spoke against God and against Moses: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.”

Come on! Who wouldn't get discouraged? After wandering around in this wilderness for forty years, they were once again close to the borders of the Promised Land, when they were told they were going around Edom, a huge detour! So close after so long, and eating the same manna every day. Even cooking it every way one could imagine, it would get old. That's where the sinful flesh took them and where it takes us often enough that we can understand where they are coming from. I mean, how many ways could you cook oatmeal before you got really tired of eating oatmeal every day for breakfast, lunch and dinner? But really, they complained that they had been delivered from the slavery of Egypt?

They had lost their appreciation of the grace and power of God in delivering them from a cruel slavery, from a life of no hope. They had lost their appreciation for how God faithfully provided for their every need day after day for that entire forty years. Their clothing and shoes had not worn out. Fresh food was available for them to pick up from the ground six days a week. **God cared for them.** Even in this time of chastisement the Lord dealt with them as beloved children, and not as enemies.

In their frustration and discouragement they spoke against God and against His appointed servant, Moses. They had forgotten how sin brings the wrath of God. They had forgotten how the wages of sin is death. In their discouragement they sinned grievously against the LORD. They found the bread which He had sent them from heaven to be worthless and loathsome.

Many years later Jesus would come into the world as the Bread of life. He would present Himself to the people as that precious Bread which nourishes the soul unto eternal life. What we read in John 6 happened the **next** day after Jesus had fed this same crowd of 5000 people with nothing but five loaves of bread and two small fish.

John 6:30-35, 57-58 Therefore they said to Him, “What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do? 31 Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” 32 Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” 34 Then they said to Him, “Lord, give us this bread always.” 35 And Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.” ... 57 As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me. 58 This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever.”

But they were not interested in this Bread which came into the world and gave eternal life. They wanted bread for the body. They wanted Jesus to feed their physical bodies making this life easy, not to feed their souls for eternal life. They found Jesus’ words to be a hard saying, and many who had believed in Him turned away from Him and walked with Him no more. They found this spiritual Bread, which is Christ, to be loathsome, and worthless. In the end they brought the wrath of God down upon themselves because of this sin of unbelief.

It is easy for us also to become discouraged in life. It is easy for us to forget that God is good, and that even in times of difficulty when we endure the chastisement of the Lord, He

only and always deals with us as a loving Father deals with His children. It is easy for us to see all that the world has and become enticed by the “sweet breads” of this world. That may include everything from an obsession with recreation and pleasure to self-fulfillment, or the work righteousness of worldly religions. All these things are more appealing to the flesh than the grace of God in Christ. We too can get caught up in the philosophy of this world, and find that our **“souls loathe this worthless Bread.”**

That becomes evident without us even saying a word. It becomes evident as we neglect to hear the Word or regard God’s Word as sacred. It becomes evident when we think lightly of sin, and so also think lightly of the sacrifice which Christ made for us to take away our sin. May it never be that we would actually say that we loathe the Bread of Life!

What happened with the Children of Israel in the wilderness sounds harsh and cruel, but in the end it was a matter of --

II. Learning Repentance.

Numbers 21:6-7 “So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. 7 Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people.”

The LORD sent fiery serpents into the camp! Take note first of all that this is the Lord Jehovah, the covenant God who had sworn to redeem His people. He sends these serpents in among the people and many people of Israel died. The sending of poisonous snakes that bit and killed many people doesn’t sound like the gracious LORD who is our Savior from sin. And yet for people to be saved there is a need for repentance. People need to be taught the true nature of sin.

Sin brings death. It was their sin that brought death into the camp of Israel.

The harsh reality of the law is a necessary lesson. The world is very evil. Sin is evil. Death comes because of sin. “**The wages of sin is death**” (Romans 6:23). That lesson needs to be learned by us also. It needs to be fresh and clear in our minds. And it is a lesson that we learn not only from hearing the Word of the Lord, the law of God, but also by the trials and tribulations of this life. Life here in this world has been corrupted by sin, and we also as children of God not only see this corruption, but feel this corruption. We are reminded again and again of our need for the Lord, not only to heal our diseases, but more importantly to heal us of our sin and the corruption and death that it brings to both body and soul.

We also need to learn repentance and what we see in the children of Israel is that repentance begins with confession. With the harsh reality of the law being brought to bear upon them they turned to Moses and confessed that they had sinned in speaking against the LORD and against Moses. They sought forgiveness and deliverance. They asked Moses to intercede for them before the LORD that the LORD might deliver them from the fiery serpents.

Again there is the lesson for us in this Scripture. Confess your sins to the LORD, resist the urge to make excuses, or claim extenuating circumstances, or pass the blame unto others. Confess your sins unto the Lord. Speak plainly, as the people of Israel did before Moses, as we have been taught to do by the Spirit, and as we do in our worship. Plead for God’s mercy and grace, that we might be delivered from the fiery Serpent, the devil who would destroy our souls.

And God is gracious to forgive. He would have us -

III. Look to the Cross for Deliverance from Death.

Numbers 21:8-9 Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.” 9 So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

What a wonderful deliverance God presented to the people of Israel. Moses was to make a bronze serpent, a model of those snakes that were biting the people and killing them, and raise it upon a pole, and set it where the people could turn and see it, and those who turned their eyes to this bronze serpent lived. There was no work for them, only to believe. They only needed to look upon the deliverance God prepared for them and they lived.

In this the people of Israel had before them a type of Christ. In His meeting with Nicodemus, a scholar of Scripture, Jesus referenced this important event in the history of Israel to teach a lesson about our salvation in Christ. Jesus said:

John 3:14-16 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

So Jesus had to be lifted upon the cross! Jesus had to be crucified for us and for our sins. He is our Redeemer. He paid the full debt of our sin. Anyone who looks to Christ crucified with eyes of faith has the forgiveness of sins. Look to the cross of Christ and you will not perish, but have eternal life. It is in this context that that a familiar and beloved Bible passage comes to us, that “**God so loved the world.**” Yes, God loved this sinful world with such a great love that He gave His only begotten Son to be raised up upon the cross,

that whoever looks to Him with eyes of faith should not merely save this temporal life, but possess everlasting life!

TLH 384:1

“Oh how great is Thy compassion,
Faithful Father, God of Grace
That with all our fallen race,
And in our deep degradation
Thou wast merciful that we
Might be saved eternally.”

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.