

Sermon for February 26, 2012 – Lent 1

Numbers 21:4-9

Theme: Look to Christ in faith

- 1) *Because we have sinned.*
- 2) *Because God has provided salvation*

⁴ *They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way;* ⁵ *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!"* ⁶ *Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.* ⁷ *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.* ⁸ *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."* ⁹ *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.*

“Patience is a virtue.” Actually it is more than that. Patience is a fruit of faith. When patience wears thin, we begin to sin. We grumble and complain. We think the worst, not only of other people, but also of God. You see, losing one’s patience is actually a symptom of a far worse problem: losing faith in God’s promises. Where faith is, patience closely follows. But how can you be patient if you don’t trust that God is working in all things for your good?

Today we are going to consider the importance of faith in God’s promises and see not only how it helps be patient, but how it saves us from sin and certain death, under the theme: **Look to Christ in faith** 1) *Because we have sinned.* 2) *Because God has provided salvation.*

Part One: Because we have sinned.

Our sermon text finds the Israelites in the desert near the end of their 40 year journey from Egypt. Approximately 40 years earlier, when they were at the borders of Canaan, the Israelites refused to take the land the LORD promised to them. They were afraid and their fear stemmed from not trusting in God’s promise to deliver them. In their rebellion, they made horrible claims against God: that he had no interest in giving them what he promised but that he brought them to the desert to die.

The LORD was grieved and angered at this accusation and lack of trust – so much so that he declared that none of those 20 years and older would enter the Promised Land except Caleb and Joshua. For 40 years they would have to wander in the desert, until the generation that rebelled had died off and been replaced.

And for 40 years they wandered in the desert. Life was hard, but the LORD always provided for them. Daily He sent manna (a sweet tasting dough) from heaven. He sent quail and made water spring forth from rocks. The LORD provided for them, and the people had the promise that at the end of the 40 years, God would bring them to the Promised Land.

The 40 years were almost over. The Israelites walked north at God’s direction. They were close – very close – to Canaan. All they had to do was cross through Edom. But here’s the thing: Edom refused to let them cross. And so the Israelites had to turn around. They had to walk over 75 miles south back to the Red Sea in order to cross some mountains and a valley and go back north over 80 miles. And this was not easy travel. Remember, the Israelites were 2 million people of a variety of age and health. The terrain was rocky, dry, hot, and mountainous. No food was in sight. There was no water. And this is where our text breaks in: ⁴ *They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way;*

Did you catch the problem? The people grew impatient. And, humanly speaking, can we blame them? Just think of how impatient we are if we have to make a 150 mile detour with a car. They had to do it in the desert, walking at a snail’s pace! But still, this impatience was sinful. Instead of asking Moses to speak to God, they began to doubt God and question his promises. They let their feelings fester until - all of a sudden – they lashed out against God and 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!"

Just stop for a moment and consider what the Israelites were saying. They were saying that it was God's and Moses' intent to kill the Israelites this entire time. They were basically saying that God is a monster who got his jollies on their suffering and death.

Before we go on and think: "Oh, those ungrateful Israelites," just think about how easily we lose patience and grumble. Think about some of the things you have thought in your heart about your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ – thinking the worst about them instead of the best. Think about the times you grumbled about how horrible your life is at that moment and questioned how God could allow this or that to happen to you. Just think about the times you wondered in your heart whether or not God really is doing what is best for you, times you wondered if God is just plain mean to you – holding out on the things you think you really deserve. Our hearts betray us, don't they? It takes a lot less than a 150 mile desert detour to get to complain. And our complaining is a result of a lack of faith.

Let's go back to the Israelites – didn't they see God's hand in this the entire time? He fed them with manna, provided quail and water when they needed it. Their clothes did not wear out. Miracle after miracle God performed before them. His very presence was with them. They defeated armies far more powerful and well equipped than they. But, in their blindness they didn't consider any of this. And so the LORD, in gracious discipline, showed them exactly what it would mean if his intent was for them to "die in the desert." *Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.*

As I said, this judgment from God was actually a part of his grace. It was meant to get the Israelites to think. It was meant to get them to repent. And repent they did: *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."*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, here we see what proper repentance is all about. Notice that the Israelites make no excuse for their sin, nor do they try to pass the blame. They know exactly what they did and they realize that the LORD's punishment is just and right. And yet, they also know that the LORD is merciful. They trust that He will forgive them. Faith in the LORD and His promises was being rekindled. This is true and genuine repentance. Take this to heart and learn from this good example.

And what did Moses do? *So Moses prayed for the people.* Moses was happy to forgive the Israelites – even though they sinned against him by blaming him. There was no, "See, I told you so," or "It serves you right." No, Moses immediately forgives and prays for the people. May the LORD grant that all of us forgive our brothers who sin against us as Moses forgave the Israelites.

Part Two: Because God has provided salvation

The LORD also forgave the Israelites, but he doesn't heal them right away. No, he plans something better, something that will remind them to always trust in Him regardless of how illogical or improbable his promises seem. ⁸ *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."* ⁹ *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.*

Faith – this is what the LORD desired from the Israelites. A lack of faith caused their rebellion and through faith the LORD would save them. Now, to be sure – a bronze snake is a bronze snake. There was nothing in that snake that could save the Israelites. But when the LORD added his promise to it, then it became a gracious means of salvation. In a way, it was sort of like baptism. The water in baptism is just water and can't do anything in and of itself. But with God's command and promise connected to it, it becomes a gracious water of life through which faith is created in our hearts and we are reborn.

Just as faith in God's promise concerning the bronze snake saved the Israelites, so faith in Christ saves us, as Jesus said: ¹⁴ *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,* ¹⁵ *that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.* (John 3:14-15)

Consider the comparisons of this account to our faith life in Christ. First of all, just like the Israelites, we all have been infected by a deadly poison from a serpent – that great serpent the devil who caused Adam and Eve – and all their children – to doubt God. Sin and unbelief are the poison we have been infected with, and without God’s intervention, eternal death in hell is our future.

But God sent his Son to save us. How is he like the bronze snake? Think of it this way – the bronze snake symbolized the curse of serpents, even though it had no venom. Jesus had no sin. But God the Father laid on him the sins of us all (Isaiah 53:6) – so much so that St. Paul says he became sin personified (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21). St. Paul writes: “*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."*” (Galatians 3:13). Our sins died when Jesus died. His death and resurrection has procured our salvation and life. It is freely offered to all – just as deliverance and life was offered to all those who were snake bitten in the desert.

And how did they receive this life and relief? Only through faith in God’s promise connected with the bronze snake on the poll. Looking at no other object would help them. The same is true with us – salvation is only received through faith in Christ Jesus. Looking to other gods or praying to Mary or the saints will not help you. We are saved through faith in Jesus and Jesus alone.

And when we look to Jesus for salvation? We are immediately healed – just like the Israelites were healed when they looked at the bronze snake – trusting the Lord’s promises. Eternal life is ours – all because of God’s gracious promise of salvation in Christ which has led us to repent and trust in Jesus for forgiveness.

And as we continue to gaze upon Christ, guess what else happens? Our faith is strengthened. And when our faith is strengthened, so is our patience. We then are able to face the rest of our journey on this earth with renewed focus and vigor – not being distracted by how difficult our journey seems, but rather trusting that God will provide everything we need, and will safely deliver us to our Promised Land of paradise with Him for all eternity. This is most certainly true. Amen.