

Old Testament Lesson—Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 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 we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

New Testament Lesson—John 3:11-17

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Now, I know what you're all thinking...

"Snakes. Why'd it have to be snakes?"

Believe it or not, I can imagine the people of Israel crying out some version of that question—long before it was made famous by Indiana Jones.

Except, the Israelites didn't just stumble upon a bunch of serpents out of nowhere. These weren't a part of some deadly, mid-adventure trap laid by ancient peoples trying to hurt would-be treasure hunters.

No, these creatures were sent deliberately by the LORD—sent directly by God to quash certain attitudes on display for all heaven to see—attitude that were, quite frankly, pitiful. Because, here's the thing: Their response to being set free in the Exodus was less than ideal (to be polite about it).

In fact, their response had become downright unacceptable—shameful. This was behavior unbecoming of God's chosen people—unsuitable for those who would (one day) be a light to the nations.

Truth is, this was more than just grumbling or airing grievances. This wasn't whining for whining's sake. Maybe you've heard the Yiddish term, "kvetching?"—complaining about incredibly trivial things? Nah, this wasn't that.

You see, God had put up with the community's complaints for a while now. In fact, God had more than just *tolerated* it. God answered their cries of misery with divine intervention. God answered their prayers with miracles—literally raining down bread from heaven.

That was God's response to their hunger—abundance—miraculous, gracious, abundance. God provided them each day their daily bread.

How appropriate actually that, on their way to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, that the people would be blessed each morning with fresh wafers that tasted of honey! These wafers, of course, became known as manna.

Eventually, a few pieces of that manna would be stored in the Ark of the Covenant—memorialized forever—kept as a reminder of God's steadfast love and faithfulness—a tangible symbol of God making a way out of no way.

However, at this point in the story, we're a long way from that kind of 20/20 hindsight. We're leaps and bounds removed from holding that holy manna in such high regard.

In fact, at this point, the people have had it with manna! At this point (according to them), it's a "miracle" they've been able to stomach it for this long!

Let's see...How did they phrase it...oh yeah, that's right: *we detest this miserable food!*

Lord, have mercy...How did their perspective change so drastically? How do you go from celebrating God's gracious generosity to just throwing it in the trash? How did this happen?

I admit, I'm completely baffled by the community's total rejection of God's miracle. I just don't get it. I mean, I'm trying to see it from their point of view—trying to empathize as best as I can.

Quick sidenote: It's always a good idea to find a way to empathize with those in Scripture—always better to withhold our judgment. It's unfair to impose our twenty-first century, modern ways of the world onto ancient peoples. It just is.

That being said: I struggle with my own advice here. But, you know, I suppose we *can* fall back on one timeless truth: We, human beings, are really good at taking things for granted—even miracles. I'd wager we've gotten better at it over the last couple thousand years.

Think, for a moment, about the many blessings we take for granted every single day. Think of those "basics" we rely on that are considered luxuries in less developed nations—things we get to enjoy just because we were born where we are—things others don't enjoy through no fault of their own. Yeah, we're really, really good at it, actually...

It's true: After stopping at nothing to free God's people from slavery, those same people feel *free* to throw their tireless complaints up at the sky. Those same people are now sick of their daily miracle. I mean, talk about biting the hand that feeds you!

It's true: God hears our cries and listens to our struggles and desperate prayers. Every single one of them. Always and forever. But this seems beyond audacious. We've got some nerve, don't we?

So it's week two in our sermon series on miracles. I promised to give you a balanced sampling from Scripture: a few stories where miracles are positive or pleasant—and a few where the miracles are less so. The one this morning hurts...

The miracle in today's story from Numbers came about through God's righteous judgment. And how fitting that God's wrath would take the form of a serpent—of the creature that first brought about divine judgment all the way back in Eden.

Now, before we get all offended and decide God's punishment to be too harsh—even unjust—before we write off the "Old Testament God" as too violent—a terrible, anti-Semitic trope by the way—before all that, let's take a step back and consider a few things...

Remember, this isn't the community's first...infraction, if you will. It's not the first time they've beat their chests in defiance—far from the first time they've raised their voices to protest the miraculous food given to them. No, God's put up with this foolishness for a long time now...

I mean...Even the most patient person in the world can only take it for so long when a less mature person takes your arm and starts bonking you with it over and over again while saying, "Stop hitting yourself. Stop hitting yourself. Stop hitting yourself."

I can't prove it. But I like to imagine the people's complaints and hurtful assumptions may have felt something like that to God.

Of course, God responded with compassion the first time around. With Egypt barely out of sight behind them, God's people started to wish they were *still enslaved*; they hurled insulting questions like, "Why have you brought us out here to die?"

(Never mind that their people WERE dying from forced labor all the time with Pharaoh's boot on their necks! I seem to remember Moses getting pretty upset once after seeing a slaver beat the you-know-what out of his people)

Had the people really forgotten how bad it was? Did they really want to return to those daily lashings? Was God's wilderness really *worse* than Pharaoh's slave camp?

Ridiculous, dramatic accusations aside, God provided them daily miracles: manna in the morning, quail in the evening, and a rock that gushed out all the water they needed. Extraordinary, really.

You'd think that would've been the end of the grumblings. Right? You'd think that would've hushed the wild accusations. But, I'm afraid you'd be wrong.

In fact, we see the community's tantrums on display even earlier in the book of Numbers! Fearing they may be killed by stronger nations (get this), the people conspire to choose a new leader (not Moses or Aaron) and *reverse the Exodus*—like become re-enslaved in Egypt! Fearing other nations!? Bless their hearts! I guess everyone had just forgotten about the devastating, powerful plagues that paid for their freedom!

Can you imagine? The people being led by a kind of anti-Moses figure back across the Red Sea and into Pharaoh's throne room: "Take my people back!" Absolutely remarkable, right? You can't make this stuff up, y'all!

That brings us to this morning's story—just the latest in a long line of horribly offensive ingratitude. Try to remember the backlog of unfounded grievances when you start to think God's actions too harsh—too severe—a bit "extra" as the kids might say.

The author tells us "the people became impatient"—that they "spoke against God and against Moses." Once again, the people accuse the LORD of bringing them to this place just to watch them die.

And if all that weren't enough to let a little divine wrath slip out, God's people (in the very same breath) lie to God's face and reject God's miraculous bounty! Here's what the text says: For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.

"Snakes. Why'd it have to be snakes?" I think we know why, my friends.

The Lord is slow to anger...*slow* to anger...**slow** to anger...and abounds in steadfast love...

No matter how justified—no matter how warranted—God's anger doesn't last. It never does. As predictably as the sunrise, the story of Scripture is that God provides a path to redemption. God provides a means to salvation and a way to forgiveness.

And, in this case, the way to salvation is just as miraculous as that heavenly bread our ancestors so easily took for granted and rejected.

So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

As the Psalmist sings: "God's anger is but for a moment; God's favor is for a lifetime." Our Lord's judgment is always (eventually) overpowered by God's love and grace. That is the story of Scripture over and over again.

And if you're still on the fence about this...if you're still unsure about our story this morning...I get it. I'm with you.

But I'd ask you, finally, to consider this. The Jesus of John's gospel knew this story very well. It was meaningful for him—so meaningful that he compared his own destiny to what God does through Moses here.

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

It's true: What put Christ on the cross wasn't good. It was shameful. And yes: The reason Moses put a bronze snake on a pole wasn't good. It was shameful.

But, hear this, siblings in Christ: God never allows our mistakes to have the last word. God won't allow our sins to be the loudest voice. Not ever!

Whether it's the wilderness of Sinai, or first-century Jerusalem, or twenty-first century America...God's generosity—God's gratitude for the covenant relationship we share, will always outlast humanity's ingratitude.

Our insistence on taking things for granted is no match for God's stubborn mercies.

And, for that...for that we will be most grateful.

Amen.