

The Fourth Sunday in Lent – 2021

Numbers 21:4-9

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

Have you ever thought: “I know a few neighborhoods where some of God’s fiery serpents could do a lot of good?”

Fiery serpents... they sank their venomous fangs into the flesh of men, injecting certain death. Why does God not send those kinds of snakes among us? What had the Israelites done to deserve that kind of rebuke? What is the difference between those OT pilgrims and the cauldron of wretched unbelief in which we soak, in which we stew, in which we steep?

Jim Croce once sang a song about certain things that sensible people just wouldn’t do. You tug on Superman’s cape. You don’t spit into the wind. You don’t pull the mask off the ‘ole Lone Ranger. Well, you Christians can add this one to the list – in fact, put it at the top. You don’t spurn God’s grace. You don’t turn up your nose at His Sacraments. You don’t despise His Son. The trouble is, our sinful flesh is not sensible. Our sinful nature is a violent, arrogant, selfish abomination – idolatrous, vindictive, and supremely entitled. There is literally nothing that our sinful nature will not do, will not say, will not think. Some of the sweetest people you know have a sinful nature. *All* of the sweetest people you know have a sinful nature.

Fiery Serpents have both a background and a now-ground and both concern you. Here’s the background. The Israelites had been spectacularly delivered from slavery in Egypt. By a mighty hand, God brought His chosen people out of that land of death and was in the process of leading them into the Promised Land. Along the way, He fed them (there was no Chick-Fil-A in the desert). Miraculous food, water from a rock – He gave them all that they needed for this body and life. Manna – supernatural bread, bread from heaven – God gave them this bread every morning, double on Fridays so that they wouldn’t have to collect it on the Sabbath. These Israelites were the object of God’s profound love, His tireless provision. These same delightful people opened their mouths and let fly the breath of hell, a radical stream of ingratitude, unbelief, and rank apostasy.

“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 loathe this worthless food’” (Numbers 21:5). Do you hear the tone implicit in those words? This was not a debate about the entre which God was serving in the desert. This was a rejection of God’s grace. Now, before I go even a sentence further, there is question that must be posed. Have you ever thought that you have crossed a line with God? Have you ever thought that by your tongue or your behavior that you had crassly blasphemed His Name, profaned His grace, trampled on His goodwill? I assure you; you have. You have done this because you have a sinful nature that is alive and active.

The Israelites were spurning God’s grace. You know this word: grace. You know how rich it is, how profound and central to our faith. God saves us by His work alone. He gives you what you do not deserve, what you could never deserve, He gives you the opposite of what you deserve. Grace; it is a word that you have heard all your life. It is *not* an abstraction. God’s grace doesn’t

arrive out of thin air. It is not generic. It is not nondescript. Grace is anchored in something real, something objective and historical. The Israelites didn't offend some abstract "goodness" that God willed to shower on His people. It is more concrete, more direct and personal than that. They were rejecting His Son.

St. Paul, in the NT, said that God gave the Israelites "water from a rock, and the rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4). The manna, the supernatural bread from heaven which God poured out for the wandering pilgrims, pointed to His approaching Son. Jesus said: "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (John 6:32-33). "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35). "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:51)

Here is the point. Here is the great and marvelous and important and central point: God intended to show them, to show us by the fiery serpents that you can't trash the Son and expect to find grace somewhere else. Jesus is explicit: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

So here comes God, actively working to *restore* the wayward Israelites to His grace and His grace alone. Fiery serpents; death dealing serpents; they bite you and you die. It woke them up. Hmmmmmm, thought the spiritually brilliant Israelites, maybe we shouldn't have spewed our petty grievances against the Lord who brought us up out of slavery, who forgives us our sins, who is leading us to a land flowing with milk and honey. "And 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'" (Numbers 21:7). Do you know what you call that? Repentance. The fiery serpents did their work. God led the Israelites back to Himself. He created in them new and contrite hearts. He does the same with you. So, here's the now-ground.

The reason that God doesn't send fiery snakes anymore is because the event is recorded in Scripture. The account of it, in His Word, makes it as effective for us as it was for them. I am to play the part of the fiery serpent, me and every other preacher of the Word. We are commanded to preach the Law in all of its severity. You hear that word and it convicts you of your sin. The neighborhood that needs the fiery serpents is the neighborhood of Christ the King, this household of faith. By the power of God's Word, we too repent. We renounce our selfishness, our greed, our judgmental heart. We endeavor to give of ourselves to our neighbor, our brother and sister in Christ. We believe and we ask God to help our unbelief. We are spiritually brave and we ask God to forgive our fear. Because sin plagues our lives we need to be restored and there is only one place to look. This we know: "God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He has loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace we have been saved" (Ephesians 2:4-5).

Grace – that is Christ on a tree. For God so loved the world... You know the verse so well. It is the most recited, most memorized, most beloved Bible verse in all of Scripture – "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). It comes in the context of those fiery snakes. Christ is the One

who was put on a pole, a cross, lifted up high and exalted, for sinners to look at and live. There, on that cross, is God's grace, in the crucified flesh of His Son. Look nowhere else for you will find it nowhere else. You cannot trample the Son of God and expect to find God's favor in anything else. But in Christ there is abundant provision, abundant life. In that one Man, who is also truly God, the Father injected the venom of our sin – the world's sin – and He died bearing it. "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" (John 3:14-15). Love, grace, and blood flowed from His body as He atoned from your sins. Love, grace, and blood flow from this altar – look here for God's grace. Supernatural food, bread from heaven, forgiveness and communion with God; we treasure this food, we treasure this grace, we treasure this divine love. Death has no bite, no venom, no sting. Christ is risen and life is the Victor. We are making our way home, to heaven, the Promised Land. As we make our way, He feeds us. Thanks be to God, He feeds us!