

To Die In the Wilderness?

Number 21:4-9

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today has historically been called Rogate Sunday in the church calendar, it is Latin for, Pray Sunday. Our text is fitting for our meditation today.

Our text finds the Israelites not long after they had come out of their slavery to Egypt. But, God's getting them released from slavery was not good enough for them. They were complaining against Moses, and against God – they claimed they did not have enough food to eat nor enough water. The problem was that what God provided, they did not like, whining that they loathed the worthless food.

God was providing for them in their wilderness experience, bread from heaven – manna, water from the rock, and quail every evening as meat. Furthermore, He had just given them an overwhelming victory over the King of Arad, destroying completely this people who wanted to harm them.

Despite the fact that God was caring for them in most generous ways, giving them their daily bread, and protecting them, they complained against God about their situation.

Isn't that just like sinful human beings? We live our daily life in the wilderness. We live in a world that is completely opposed to God and His Word and will. God provides all that we need for this life and our life of faith. Still we complain. We complain about the problems in our life – like illness, suffering, trials at work, or troubles with our friends.

We may have a wonderful wife or husband, family, enough to eat every day, a roof over our heads, and probably many things that are far beyond the necessary things needed to live our lives – even enough toys to keep us entertained, and enough food that often there is waste.

Of course, even with all that, even when things go the way that we'd like them to, we still find reasons to complain – things are not as perfect as we **WANT** them to be.

Add to this the fact that we become so focused only on the things we can see and touch, that we easily forget about eternal and unseen things. Or if we do consider faith issues, we complain about God's gifts there as well, they are not what we *want*.

Pastor's sermons are too long and always have to talk about sinfulness. We always do the same thing every Sunday, the service is so boring. We always have to receive the same forgiveness and the same meal of Christ's body and blood! We are tired of this worthless food. Dear friends, such complaints are a form of unbelief.

It is in the face of the Israelites' complaining that God acts in His great love and sends fiery serpents among them to lead them to repentance. Yes, you heard me correctly, it is in His great love that God sends the serpents among them. Why? How is that loving? It is only then that the people of Israel realize their sinfulness against God, "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."

But God does not take away the serpents. Instead, God commands Moses to make a bronze serpent and put in on a pole, and if a serpent bit anyone, he was to look at the bronze serpent and he would live.

That sounds pretty silly – look at a snake on a stick and the poison in my flesh will be taken away and I will be healed? That is ridiculous! Can looking at a bronze snake on a stick heal? No! There is nothing magical about a serpent on a stick. The bronze serpent did not heal them.

But, when they were broken to the point of repentance, when in faith they would do just as God commanded and look at that bronze serpent – trusting in God’s Word of promise – they would be healed.

Trusting in God’s Word is not easy. Doing what He says is difficult. It is hard because we are living in the wilderness. God’s Word is always being challenged by the things of the world.

Problems arise and we ask questions, doubts arise, “Really, God is with us? How come it seems that I am all alone? Why does it feel like I am facing all of life’s struggles and not getting any help from God?”

If that is not enough, today’s culture challenges God’s Word and tells abominable lies that we are tempted to believe. “Abortion is a choice for a woman to make with her own body.” “I should be able to choose the quality of my life and when I die.” “Sometimes God makes mistakes because He isn’t 100% in control of stuff, sometimes He accidentally puts men in women’s bodies and women in men’s bodies.” “Homosexuality is just another way of experiencing love with another individual, it isn’t wrong.” “If you love me, you will sacrifice God’s gift of your sexuality to be shared with your spouse, and you will make love to me.”

The list of temptations that come our way is legion. We all face temptations to sin every day. We all live in the wilderness. Temptations come upon us, and at times, may even lead us away from God. Trials, temptations, suffering, and the difficulties of simple life come upon us, and we may question God. It is true, throughout our lives we are wandering in the wilderness.

That is why Jesus came into our world, taking on human flesh. He was tempted in every way, just like we are. His Hebrew school friends tempted Him. In the garden of Gethsemane, Satan tempted Jesus to lure him away from the task set before Him. Jesus would not be deterred, He continued on the path the Father had set for Him from the foundation of the world.

Jesus allowed Himself to be arrested and to be beaten. He submitted His flesh to the cruel bite of the nails which secured Him to the cross. There, upon that stick, He became sin for us, bearing the weight of our sins and suffering even the Father’s abandonment, enduring the forsaken-ness of hell for us.

We are not invited to look up at a stick with a snake upon it. But, God’s promise to us is almost as unbelievable. The One crucified upon the cross, who was nailed to a stick, trust what He has done.

He says, “Hear my word! Let the minister I have called to be your shepherd speak My Word of forgiveness to you, and by faith, believe the promise that in the Word He speaks, by my authority, your sins are truly and completely forgiven.”

We but are invited to take into our own mouths the very body of Him who died for us, and drink of the blood He shed to purchase our forgiveness. But it looks like just bread and wine. As we eat and drink, Christ comes to dwell within us, granting forgiveness through this meal, and strengthening faith to trust that we have eternal life and salvation in His holy name.

God knows of your temptations to fall away from faith. He knows your daily temptations to sin. He knows of the intense desire to abandon weekly attending church in order to be fed through Word and Sacrament, that it is only meaningless ritual.

But it is in these means of grace that God has promised to care for you throughout your journey in the wilderness of this life. When bitten by the serpent, and falling into sin which would most certainly bring death – and you will be bitten – and you will fall into sin, you are invited by God to come receive the gifts of His promise which bring forgiveness and life.

I cannot change the word of forgiveness I am instructed by God to speak to you. I will never stop calling you to repentance in each and every sermon. Nor will I cease proclaiming Christ's forgiveness to you in each and every one of them – even as I am now doing. I will not spice up the service with strange ceremonies and unique ideas that change every week.

But, I will proclaim to you that you are forgiven, for you are. I will do as Christ instructed, presiding over the sacrament and giving you to eat and to drink of Christ's body and blood – just as Jesus has commanded me to do.

The Israelites may have wondered why they should look at a serpent on a stick, but it was God's promise to bring them healing and life.

You may wonder why we do the same things every week, but they are God's promise to bring you His healing and life eternal. No matter what things may happen out there in the wilderness, these things remain constant. God's gifts do not change. This is the one place you may come to, knowing what you will receive here, as the rest of the world seems to be spinning out of control.

Christ has instituted His Church in order that death might not overtake you in the wilderness, but that instead you may find a haven here of peace, refreshment, and healing. He has called His ministers to proclaim His promises, so that you might hear and believe and be saved. Christ has instituted His supper that you might eat and drink the refreshment of His life given to you.

I beg you dear friends, continue in God's grace, for it is life eternal for you, even as you wander in the wilderness. Amen.