

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
March 18, 2012**

Numbers 21:4-9

The Simplicity of God's Remedy!

- 1. *Something else never changes***
- 2. *The 1st Does of Medicine***
- 3. *The 2nd Does of Medicine***

Hymns: 108 – A Purple Robe – 123 – 116

Closing: 114 (v. 5)

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; 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!"

Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 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.

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." 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. (Numbers 21:4-9)

It might be human nature in general, but we especially live in a culture that is fond of matchups. Perhaps it comes from our nation's infatuation with sports, but how often don't you see things compared with a versus: David vs. Goliath; cats vs. dogs; man vs. woman; apple vs. PC. When it comes to the Bible, I think a common perception is to pit the OT vs. the NT, as if they have two very different messages.

And, certainly, a look at the Old Testament appears to show great differences when it comes to the life of devotion to God. There were the many sacrifices that the people had to make day after day, an endless cycle of bloodshed that was prescribed with great detail in the book of Leviticus. There were the many painstakingly detailed laws given in the book of Exodus, and then repeated in Deuteronomy, which the people were commanded repeatedly to obey. The instant punishment that often came as the direct result of grievous sins is seemingly very different than what we see today. All of that focus on rite and obedience can leave people with the impression that the Old Testament believers were very different than Christians like you and me in the New Testament. It can sometimes seem like action was a bigger part of their relationship with God.

But what we are shown, what we are reminded of in this familiar lesson from Numbers is that God's remedy always remains the same! The solution that God gives to his people never changes, whether it be for Adam and Eve in the Garden, the people of Israel in the wilderness, or you and I in the Pacific NW.

The biggest reason that God's remedy for his people never changes is that his people's sickness never changes. Man and his sinfulness is a recurring illness. Think first about the people of Israel. If you asked me to use one word to describe the children of Israel during the time of the Exodus, the choice would be easy: Complainers. These people were complainers. As we meet them here in Numbers 21, we find them on the brink of conquest. They are so close to finally tasting the goodness of the Promised Land of Canaan. And what has happened to them for the past 40 years is truly remarkable. They have stayed alive as wanderers in the middle-eastern desert. They have seen miracle after miracle; from rivers parting before them to drinking water flowing out of rocks; from manna supplied out of heaven to sandals and clothes that did not wear out after 40 years of use. Now, they were about to take over their land, and what was their reaction? You would think that it would be to rejoice over what was ahead. You would think it would be to give thanks for what was behind. But as these people stood on the

brink, they saw one last opportunity to complain. Though they were a new generation of people, they fell into the same trap as their parents. They doubted God's plan. They questioned Moses' leadership. They were unappreciative of the miracles and they actually longed for a return to back-breaking slavery. Their constant grumbling and complaining was a slap to God's face. It was a constant problem, a reoccurring ailment that they struggled to shake free from.

And while we probably often shake our heads in disapproval at the foolishness of the Israelites in the desert, the truth is that we are no better at leaving behind the sins that plague each one of us. If the details of your life were recorded in writing like the Israelites, what would people see happening over and over again. What seemingly foolish wrong would they repeatedly look at saying, "Why don't they learn from their mistakes? Why do they keep falling into that trap?" Those recurring sins are what plague us. They are often impossible to shake. For the Israelites, their life situation left them susceptible to complaining and disrespecting God. What ails you?

Of course, there are many possible ailments. I won't list them all, and certainly it is you alone that knows what infects you. The sin that infects us has deadly potential if it is allowed to go unchecked. We can see that from the history of the Israelites. After 400 years of slavery in Egypt, and after 40 years of wandering in a desert, complaining had become second nature. Yet what came natural to them was significant in God's eyes. He knew that it had the ability to lead these people to go in search of other gods and solutions to their problems. He knows that the unchecked sins in our lives have the potential to take us all the way down.

But before that happens, God wants to bring a remedy for sin. And the first dose of medicine for the Israelites was a difficult one. The fiery serpents that infested the camp of the Israelites were the first dose in God's plan for remedy. In order to clearly understand this story, you need to realize that those snakes weren't the problem, they were the start of the answer. They didn't just come to bring pain and death to those who deserved it, those snakes came for a much more important purpose. The pain and fear were

to be a clear reminder that God was in control and God did not take sinful disobedience lightly. Through those snakes, the people would know clearly that there were results for their sins. The law is always part of the remedy in God's hospital; the painful, yet necessary first step on the road to recovery.

And while I'm fairly certain that fiery serpents have never delivered the law to any of us with a deadly venom, we have all felt the piercing sting of the law in our lives. That sting of the law can come in many different ways from the hand of God. Most often, it comes through a guilty conscience that tells us with a pained heart that we have broken God's commands. Maybe it comes through a daily devotion that hits where it hurts or a pastor's sermon that seems to be written just for you. Quite often, God brings his curbing law to you before it causes much outward damage in your life. However, like the Israelites, maybe there are times when God has delivered this first dose in more painful ways. Perhaps you can think of a time when God's delivery of the law has brought painful results into your life and possibly into the lives of those around you. There are times when our sin has direct repercussions. That pain is never enjoyable; nor were these snakes enjoyable for the Israelites, but that pain becomes even worse if we don't see that it is a part of God's remedy for our sin.

For the Israelites in the desert, the painful first dose worked just as God wanted. Whereas their fathers never learned from the Lord's chastisement, we hear a different reaction from this new generation of Israelites, "***The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you.'***" From those words, we see that the first dose of medicine led to repentance. The law filled the people with a sense of remorse and they turned to God for help.

And in light of that repentance, God had the second dose of medicine ready for the people. He did not leave his people hanging for an answer. When there was repentance, God's relief came immediately. "***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.'***" What is very interesting about the Lord's relief is that he did not take the snakes away. What he

did for the people was to give them a way to show their faith. It would've been very easy for the people to doubt or even despise the remedy that God gave to them. The people came to God for deliverance from snakes and instead he tells them to look up to the thing that they despised. There had to be doubts among some of the people about such a foolish remedy.

But for those who looked with faith upon that object of scorn, they quickly learned what it brought. It was a remedy that was everything that the people needed. The effects were immediate. Moses tells us that as soon as faith looked to this bronze snake, there were instant effects. And they were complete. There was no step-by-step healing process. God brought full relief. But what is most striking about the remedy that God brought to the people is the fact that this way to relief was exclusive, not in who it was for, but that this was the only way to find relief. The people couldn't go out and find it on their own; they couldn't find temporary relief in another place; they had to look in faith to the answer that God had given them through Moses or they would die.

And of course, we know the same is true for us. When God works through the law, so that we see our sin for what it is and come to God asking for his help, he is always there with that second dose of the cure. Those who feel the pain of their sin are never left hurting when they come to God for help. As he had an answer for the Israelites, so he has an answer for all of us. And that remedy never changes. We heard the familiar message in the Gospel lesson. ***“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*** We go to God for help and he tells us to look in faith to his answer. And the God-given remedy we find in Jesus is everything that we need. When sinners look in faith to Christ, the results are immediate and complete. Sinners inflicted with the hurt of sin aren't left waiting for the treatment to take effect. They don't have to wonder if the treatment got rid of it all. When you are afflicted by sin, and you look in faith to that unlikely place of healing, there is full and immediate forgiveness.

And it is only in this one place that healing can be found. The healing that is given

by God is exclusively found in Jesus and his cross. There is no other place where a person can go. There is no other remedy that will prove effective. For relief from the sting of Satan, we can only look to this great remedy given by God in his Word. It is always, and only, faith in God and his promises that brings healing. Whether you are an Israelite snake-bitten by sin in the desert wilderness or a Christian poisoned by the venom of Satan, we can rejoice because God's answer never changes. We are never left guessing. We are never out searching. What saved people 4,000 years ago still saves people today. It is faith in a remedy. It is faith in a promise. And the beauty of that saving Gospel message never changes!