

Sermon Numbers 21 4 9 4th Sunday in Lent Series B

Sermon: 4th Sunday in Lent

Text: Numbers 21:4-49 (v. 8)

Theme: Look to the cross!

Goal: In the midst of all the problems and temptations, lift your eyes to God's solution: the crucified Christ.

Dear Friends,

Introduction: Have you ever walked in the bush where there are serpents? What did you do? Did you walk looking down, your eyes glued to the ground, to avoid stepping on a snake? Probably you did. But because of looking down due to your concerns and fears you didn't see the beauty of the sky, splendour of the trees, the colours of the birds and the grandness of the wildlife.

The Israelites were facing a terrible snake plague. What was God's advice? *Don't worry about the snakes anymore. Lift up your eyes!*

I – The rebellion

The Israelites were on their way to the Promised Land. They had been delivered from Egypt's slavery by God's mighty hand. They were wandering through the wilderness, guided by the cloud of God's presence. When they lacked water, God gave them water from the rock. When they lacked food, God gave them Manna, the Bread of Heaven, fresh every morning at the entrance of their tents; they just needed to collect it and prepare it. - Of course, it was not a Paradise in the wilderness, but they had enough to go forward, and they had the Promised Land in front of their eyes. There was hope!

But even so they complained a lot against God and against Moses. During the 40 years of wandering through the desert, several times they rebelled against God's provision. Our text is about one of the most remarkable examples of those rebellions. They didn't speak

only against God and against Moses, but they blasphemed when they 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”, the Manna. They refused the bread of Heaven!

This is not just an old story to be remembered. Try to remember when you and I were young. How many times we complained to our parents or to our teachers that this and that was not good enough; or, if you studied in a Boarding School, that the food was not well prepared... And what about our children? Do they complain that they don't receive the tennis racket they want, or the latest cell model...? We have more than enough, and still we complain. Take care... God listens to our complaints...

II – The punishment

God is patient, but sometimes He becomes angry. He sent venomous snakes among the people and many of them died. It was impossible to avoid the snakes in the desert. They were everywhere and even crept into their tents. - You know how dangerous it is when you camp, if you don't keep the entrance of the tent closed.

It is difficult to say when a tragedy happens nowadays that this is God's punishment or if it is the natural consequence of some mistake. If someone has a promiscuous life and gets HIV infected, we cannot say that this is God's punishment. Or if a drunker suffers an accident, we cannot say that this is Gods punishment. They are suffering the direct consequences of their sin.

On the other hand, the letter to the Hebrews says that God punishes His children because He loves them! He doesn't want His children to go astray, but He calls them back through punishment. “My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as his son.” - Endure hardship as

discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They (our fathers) disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:5-11).

It is like when you punish your child and don't allow him to go to certain parties where he/she wants to go. But you know that it is not good for him. He doesn't understand the punishment, but it is for his/her good.

III – God's Salvation

The people understood that they had sinned against God. They turned back repented and confessed to Moses: “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 to the Lord.”

The Lord didn't attend the prayer as they requested it. He didn't take the snakes away. On the contrary, He said to Moses to make a bronze “snake and to put it up on a pole; anyone who was bitten can look at it and live.”

Lift up your eyes! Don't look to the snakes. There is hope! God gave a promise! Let's believe in it! “Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.”

Faith! Faith in God's promise! Faith in God's power and mercy!
There are always snakes on the way. Temptations abound all around us. The old snake, Satan, is still biting and deceiving God's people.

But there is One put on the pole of a cross to whom we shall look: Jesus. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him... shall not perish but have eternal life” says Jesus in our Gospel (John 3:14-16). As the bronze snake was symbolizing all the poisons snakes, Jesus summoned the sins of all humankind over Him. He was made sin for us! Paul wrote: “God made Him (Jesus) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Now, when we look to Him and trust in Him, we are free from the poison of sin and from death and have eternal life! This is God’s promise: Just believe in it and you will have life... in spite of the serpents on your way.

Conclusion: Our Order of Service has something to teach us related to this story. We daily sin. We feel God’s wrath upon us and the punishment is evident if nothing is done. We come to the Service and, first of all, we confess our sins to God saying: *We have sinned against You in thoughts, words and deeds... We justly deserve Your present and eternal punishment... - What is God’s solution? Look to Jesus, the crucified. There your sins were paid. Believe in my promise and you will be forgiven. – And we pray: For the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us... And we hear the voice of Jesus through the mouth of the pastor: I forgive you all your sins... And God is so good that He comes again in the Service to assure us of His love and His forgiveness when He gives the Holy Body and the Holy Blood of His Son for us at the Holy Communion. – Can anyone avoid God’s Table and say: “I detest this miserable food”, this Bread of Heaven? NEVER! We have it in high consideration as a holy gift of God and we believe in His promise. “Therefore...let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfector of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1,2) and receive forgiveness and life through Him. Amen.*

Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, Cape Town, 15 March 2015