

March 18, 2012  
Lent 4

*"There Is a Good Cure for the Bite of Sin"*

## **NUMBERS 21:4-9**

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**T**hey traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea,<sup>[a]</sup> to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; <sup>5</sup> they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

<sup>6</sup> Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> 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, they lived.

"The people grew impatient on the way: they spoke against God and against Moses." There are times when good words come out of our mouths and there are times when bad words come out of our mouths. I am not talking about the dirty and foul words that some people use. I am talking about the bad words that come from our mouths when we grumble and complain about our problems in life as if we had nothing for which to be thankful as the people did against the Lord and Moses.

Sometimes grumbling and complaining is loud and vociferous, others times it is muted and silent, hardly audible, but still there. Then there are the multiple times that grumbling and complaining and whining never result in actual words coming from mouths. The grumbling stays imbedded in the inner recesses of our hearts and minds, simmering and steeping and stewing, and making us very unhappy people.

Grumbling and complaining also makes us unacceptable to God. A holy and righteous God cannot accept people whose lives are marred by these sinful, offensive outbursts of grumbling and complaining. God must, by his very nature as a holy and perfect God, cast us off forever. There is no way to get rid of these offensive sins by trying to improve ourselves by improving in the future. The toxic venom of sin has no human antidote.

That's why we need to go to God's hospital for a cure. God's hospital is Jesus. Jesus said, "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 may have eternal life." Before us this morning we have an amazing account of God's people turning to brass snake put up on a pole to be cure from the venomous bites of deadly stakes.

### **The bite**

God's Old Testament people were bitten by something worse than poisonous snakes. They

were bitten by the sin of complaining against the Lord their God who had miraculously taken care of them for forty years.

It says that they traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea to go around Edom. They are on the cusp of entering the Promised Land, but the king of Edom will not let them go through his land. They have to travel east out into the desert wilderness, then north, and then west to finally get to the place where they will cross the Jordan River in the land God has prepared for them.

Forty years before this they were ready to go into the Promised Land, but then the people lost confidence in the Lord, when the report came back about how strongly fortified the land was. Numbers 14 tells us, "All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron... 'If only we had died in Egypt'" and then they said, "We should choose a new leader and go back to Egypt." God's plan to cure these two million people of their grumbling and complaining is to have them live in tents out in the desert for forty years. In the school of hard knocks the Lord would teach his chosen people to rely on him and trust in him.

What a disappointment these people were to the Lord. Once again the year close to crossing the Jordan River and entering into the land flowing with milk and honey. Nasty words come from their hearts and mouths. "Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" No bread? No water? That simply was not true. Every day the Lord provided them manna from heaven. He gave them water that miraculously flowed from a rock. Now they call this manna, this bread of angels, "miserable food." Think of all the stories the parents told the children about crossing the Red Sea, and the cloud that covered them during the day and the pillar of fire by night, and the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, and God's special presence with them in the Holy Tabernacle that they set up wherever they traveled. Can't you hear the anger in the words as they lash out against the Lord, "And we detest this miserable food?"

These are God's chosen, covenant people. They made a unique agreement with the Lord that if they were faithful to his covenant he would bless them, and if they turned against the Lord they wanted the Lord to punish them. The Lord will not let this egregious grumbling and complaining go unchecked. "Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died." These were no ordinary snakes. They were sent by the Lord. They were aggressive. Their venomous bites killed many people. The venom enters the body, breaks down the tissue and causes internal hemorrhaging resulting in painful and gruesome death.

As bad as the snake bites were, the deadly venom of sin that led to the rebellious grumbling and complaining was much worse. How quickly Adam and Eve changed when they were bitten by sin. They changed from people who praised God to people who were accusing each other and even God. "The woman you put here with me-she gave me some fruit from the tree-and I ate it." Adam's sin has been passed down to all of us. The nefarious grumbling and complaining finds its root in our hearts and lives. Think of all the unhappy moments you experience in life when you open yourself up to grumbling and complaining. In his letter to the Corinthians Paul has this to say about these people who turned against the Lord: "We should not test the Lord as some of them did- and were killed by snakes."

The deadly venom of sin that infects us all has no human cure. Pity the pure person who tries to suck out the venom where the snake has bitten, or put some salve on it, or cover it with a Band Aid. Pity even more the poor person who foolishly thinks sinful thoughts and actions such as grumbling and complaining can be removed from the record by doing better next time. In Numbers 32:23 Moses told the people if they were unfaithful to the Lord, their sin would find them out. The only cure for sin and hope for forgiveness and escape from the judgment rests in God's cure for the problem of sin, not human concoctions and inventions.

## **The cure**

The cure that the Lord had for the snake bites was a good cure, a perfect cure. The cure the Lord has for all the sin that infects us is also a good cure, actually a perfect cure. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take away the snakes from us." The people confessed their sin against the Lord. They do not offer any lame excuses for what they did wrong. They asked Moses to plead for them, just as we ask Jesus to plead for our forgiveness on the basis of the cure that he won for us at the cross.

The Lord told Moses to put a bronze snake up on the pole. "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." The very object that had brought death into their lives is now cast in bronze and hanging on a pole. It becomes their hope of a cure. It says that everyone who looked at the bronze snake lived. What about those who laughed at this cure, or thought their home made remedies were better than the Lord had to offer? Of course they died an agonizing death.

And so they ran through the camp telling everyone they could, "Look at me! Look at me! I was bitten by snake, and I was dying, but now I am alive." Can't you see them carrying those who are dying to the place where the snake was on the pole? Can't you hear them pleading, "I know you think this is nonsense, but it works, believe me it works immediately. Oh, please just look up at the bronze snake and believe what Moses is telling us. The cure is so amazing."

The people asked the Lord to take the snakes away. He did not answer their prayer immediately but he did give them a cure that worked immediately. The snakes stay around to inject their deadly poison. Sin will always be around as long as we live in this life. With Paul we confess, "I know that in me that is in my flesh dwells no good thing." Today, and tomorrow, and the next day, and until I die, I will need the cure that my heavenly Father provides for me in Jesus his Son.

How good is the cure that Jesus provides? Listen again to how Jesus draws our attention to himself by comparing himself to this bronze snake that was put up on a pole. "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 may have eternal life." Look at Jesus lifted up on the cross. Isaiah described Jesus as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." Could that man hanging on this hideous instrument of Roman torture possibly be the cure for the sin of the world? Speaking on these words of Jesus from John 3 Martin Luther said, "Christ may be viewed and defamed this way in the world. I don't care. I will still regard this vile worm as the

Savior of the world and my Redeemer and Lord.”

It says of the people who looked up to the bronze snake, “They looked at the bronze snake and they lived.” Today we celebrate the cure that comes to us at the cross. We come to worship confessing the disease of sin that has infected us. We confess our total inability to do anything to rescue ourselves. Then we look at Jesus and find ourselves completely cured. “The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin.” If someone you love is bitten by a snake, it will not do any good to try and suck the venom out. But Jesus did that for you and for me. He took the venom of sin on himself and became sin for us. “The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed.”

Run through the camp. Show them where you were bitten. Dance up and down for joy like a little child. It’s OK. Bring other people who are dying. Help them look up to the cross and live. Don’t be afraid to come back to the cross, again and again and again. Amen.