

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The arrangement of our lectionary readings gives us a great gift today. It shows us that Jesus is the key to making complete sense of the Old Testament. Jesus is the culmination and direction of the Old Testament, he is the promised Messiah. By using Jesus as the lens through which we read these ancient narratives we can make sense of all that is happening there. Today we are going to begin with our reading from Numbers and then look at what Jesus says about this story both to make sense of him and make sense of this wandering, and then we are going to see how they both apply to us.

Numbers 21:4–9 (ESV) **The Bronze Serpent**

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵And 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.” ⁶Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷And 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.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” ⁹So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Pray

We must first understand the setting. The Israelites are in the wilderness, they are on their long walk to the promised land. They have lived through slavery, the genocide of their children, the plagues in Egypt, the Passover, the Exodus, and the Red Sea. They’ve seen and heard the presence of God through countless miracles in those plagues, Passover, Red Sea, Mount Sinai, the pillar of fire and cloud, water from the rock, manna and quail for food, and have won several battles because God has conquered their enemies.

They have the promise of the new land, but they are also impatient and they love to complain. They forget why God brought them out of Egypt, what God saved them from, how he has led them and what he has promised for them. They also forget why the wilderness wanderings take so long, and that it is a punishment for their previous complaints and unfaithfulness.

This causes them to grumble, and we should note the extent and content of their complaint: “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.” Despite God’s promises they see that their fate is death, from starvation and dehydration, and although they concede they do have food after many years it has become loathsome to them.

God’s immediate reaction is to give them some of the death they so expect, at the hands of fiery serpents. This quickly brings the people to repentance and confession. God relents of his punishment and so that they can exercise their faith, he gives them the serpent on a pole to look at and be saved. Jesus makes this serpent on the pole make sense when he says, ‘as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him

may have eternal life.' Looking to the serpent was an act of faith, it demonstrated that the person knew that by looking God would save them. On that pole God had them place the very thing that was a danger to them, the serpent. Here is the connection for us, God puts the very thing that is a danger to us on a pole, lifted up, so that we can look at Him and believe. God puts death, God puts himself on a pole and lifts it up so that we can believe and look. God destroys the thing that is destroying the Israelites as he destroys the thing that is destroying us. In Jesus' death and resurrection, he destroys death, so that we can look to Jesus, death, and join him in eternal life. Here we see that salvation comes through repentance and faith. Turning from sin to trust in the one true God. In the specific example of the Israelites, they are saved from the serpent by looking at the serpent on the pole. In the universal sense, God saves by having Jesus lifted up and calling all to look to him and believe, that in his death and resurrection, he destroys death and gives eternal life. This is his love for his people that he saves us even when and precisely because we are sinners as Paul puts so clearly in Ephesians 2.

We want to consider this story for us in two ways, firstly individually and secondly in a communal setting. For we too are inclined to complain against God. We complain that we are going to die. This is true in the personal and communal sense. We fear that we may die and our faith isn't strong enough, or we forget his promise that we will not die but have eternal life if we believe in him. This affects how we go about living, always fearing death more than we fear, love and trust God.

Collectively we fear that our parish or congregation will die, either because we all die or we run out of money first, and we use this to complain against God.

We complain about the food God has given us to eat and we're not talking just about physical food. Here we are talking about his Word to sustain us for eternal life and his very own body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. He gives these to us as a gift, and he reveals himself in these gifts, he wants to feed us for our long sojourn on earth, but we neglect them as worthless or old-fashioned. We treat his sacrament as a magic trick or a meaningless memorial meal. We resent that he doesn't give us better more exciting food and we wonder why our congregations languish when it should be obvious that neglect of God's Word is our biggest problem.

We complain that he saves us with water. Not only does he feed us bodily and sustain our bodies with water, but he guards our eternal life with his baptism. Yet we ignore that we are baptized and live as if we belong to the world or complain that our conversation was not more exciting or that baptism can't possibly sustain us from new birth to the new heaven. We get downhearted when children are baptized and then don't return to God's house and this becomes a complaint, or we complain to God that we have not had more baptisms.

In all these complaints against God, we forget many things. We forget that God has called us, and put his name on us, by proclaiming the gospel to us and by marking us with the cross in our baptism. We forget what God has saved us from, sin, death and the devil.

We forget how he has saved us and that is by lifting up his Son on the cross. He has saved us by crushing death by his death. He has saved us by the washing of rebirth through the Holy Spirit. He saves us by his continuous presence and feeding, both in his Word and by his body and blood in his Sacrament.

We forget that he has led us through many dangerous toils and snares already. Not only has he led us into his family, into his kingdom but he has led us through many earthly trials also. He has led some of you across the world, and others across this country, this state or this city. He's led us collectively through previous financial difficulties, low attendance numbers, pastoral vacancies, parish realignments, conflict, challenging building projects and adventurous house acquisitions. He leads us through all these things and often we forget at the time and fail to remember after the fact. In all these things he has been faithful to his promise and continues to sustain us with life, water and food, both physically and spiritually.

But we still forget that he is feeding us in his Word and in his Supper. We forget that he keeps us in the true faith and we forget that the reason we might be wandering in a wilderness is because we have sinned and need to learn and repent.

The Israelites have something we don't, they have God and his prophets telling them why they are suffering. Christian suffering should be looked at from at least two perspectives, we suffer as a consequence of sin (our own or others sinning against us), but we also suffer so that we rely on Christ and not our own works. Perhaps we should consider that we are not called to discern this difference, instead, we should accept that our suffering might always serve both purposes, to call us to repent and to drive us away from self-reliance and back to Christ.

Most of all we forget that he has something more for us, that we too have a promised land to which he has called us. We have a new kingdom to join him in, not an earthly kingdom, but his eternal kingdom and it is in this kingdom that he wants us to be with him for eternal life.

The solution to our complaints is the same as the Israelites, confession and faith. Yes, we daily find that we are great sinners and daily we need to kneel at the cross, we need to unburden ourselves and look to the very thing that is destroying us, death. We need to confess and believe that Jesus has suffered and died for us. We need to look to him and see that in his death he is destroying death so that we do not fear death but look to his promise of eternal life.

We may also need to collectively confess our sins and change our behaviour when we find we have not been faithful. We always want to consider personal and corporate confession in light of that Son of Man lifted up. We don't confess, repent or attempt to reform our ways because we think we can earn God's favour. We do so because he has already looked kindly on us and done everything needed to save us. We repent because we believe, that 'as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“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 3:14–16 (ESV)

Amen