

*Snakes Alive*

Someone said, “The more you complain, the longer you live.” If that’s true, I think I know some people who are going to live on this earth forever. Don’t you? Or maybe it’s true that life just seems longer to the constant complainers. Life certainly seems longer to those who have to listen to their whining.

The sad fact is that there are, and always have been, people who can only see the dark cloud that comes with every silver lining. These are the people who can count all the thorns on every rosebush. I’m sure that you can identify people like that in your workplaces, schools, and even the church. All around us are people who never played a down of organized football but know more than the Steelers’ players and coaches. All around us are people who never attended medical school but who know more than any doctor. Everyday the print media and the airwaves are full of pundits who could easily fix all the problems in the world but who have never their selves held an elected office. Such people grumbled against God and against Moses in the wilderness because they thought they knew better than God and Moses.

I think it’s interesting and significant that the people complained against both God and Moses. To complain about Moses was the same thing as complaining about God, because Moses was the leader God had chosen for His people. Often we are slow to recognize those whom God has called. Whenever someone puts his head above the crowd there’s always some “wannabe” there trying to knock it off. Many an insignificant person tries to

make his self or herself look bigger by taking down a true leader. There may well have been such jealousy among the Israelites regarding Moses, despite all God had accomplished through him.

Again and again throughout Lent we are reminded how God used Moses to save his people from slavery in Egypt. We are reminded how God fed them with manna, bread from heaven, as they meandered through the Wilderness toward the Promised Land. You would think that would have been enough for them. You would think that would have satisfied them. But no, they wanted more. Some people are just never satisfied. They are only truly happy when they are utterly miserable, and making others miserable as well. Do you know people like that? No matter how good things are they have to find something wrong, some issue to raise, something to complain about. God had a way of dealing with such people.

Again and again throughout Lent we see in our scripture readings a side of God we don't like to think about too often: the awesome, wrathful side of God. The Book of Numbers does not sugarcoat things. The Bible says clearly and plainly that God punished the people's grumbling by sending poisonous serpents among them. The serpents bit the people and they died. This is an instance where the punishment really fit the crime.

Aren't the gossips, the backstabbers, and malcontents among us like a lot like snakes? Snakes are crafty and spineless. They hide in the grass or the brush, and strike their victims without fair warning. Although they are lowly creatures that slither through the dirt, their bite can be deadly. Cowardly people do that to one another with the rumors and half-truths that

get spread around the office coffee pot and over the cell phone. That poisonous serpents would strike the rebellious snakes in the house of Israel seems like poetic justice to me.

At the same time that we unequivocally say that the serpent attack was God's punishment for the people's sin, we also have to be fair and say that not all the calamity and suffering we or anyone else endures is necessarily God's punishment for sin. God gives his human creatures free will, and using that free will they sometimes injure other human beings. As I often say, sometime we suffer because of our own sin and sometimes we suffer because of the sin of others. In fact, as bizarre as it sounds, our suffering actually seems to be greater the closer we get to God.

When we try to do what's right, evil resists our efforts. When you are doing nothing, the devil leaves you alone. He has no reason to bother you; you're not bothering him. It's only when you try to do something good that you are going to encounter opposition. Luther said, "Wherever Christ builds a church, the devil build a chapel." True gospel ministry always finds obstacles in its way. And when everyone speaks well of you and your life is going along smoothly – watch out! You're probably more concerned with pleasing people than pleasing God. But if you try to live by God's word and you've got problems, and people are giving you a hard time, then you probably really are fighting the uphill battle of building the Kingdom of God. So hang in there and keep the faith.

Getting back to the story we find in the Book of Numbers, while the serpents were still attacking, the people repented. They recognized their sin. They

drew the connection between their grumbling and the poisonous serpents. That's rather unique. I find very few people who would ever even entertain the notion that they could perhaps be mistaken, much less admit that they had actually sinned. Lent is supposed to be a season of repentance, but four weeks in still many of us harbor the attitude, "There's nothing wrong with me, it's the rest of the world. I never do anything wrong." If that's what you're thinking – and you know you are – you've got to turn that around.

In loving response to their genuine change of heart, God provided the Israelites with a means of being saved from the poisonous serpents – and it's a means that will strike us as strange in a couple of ways. God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on pole. Anyone bitten by a serpent could look at the serpent on the pole and be saved. That's strange. How did that work? What was the physical/medical principle behind that? I don't know. That's a question for God's engineering team; I'm just a sales associate.

What's also strange is that the people seem to have had to cooperate in some way to get the healing. They had to look at the bronze serpent. God didn't just immediately heal them all with a word or make the serpents disappear. Being told that looking at the bronze serpent could cure you, and then looking at the serpent for healing, would be an act of faith. Doing something to access God's grace may make a lot of us Lutheran types nervous because we're very into "justification by grace" and we're suspect of anything that smacks of "works righteousness." I explain it this way: God provides the means of grace, in this case the bronze serpent, but human beings respond in faith to God's overture of grace, and in that way we

receive the benefits of his love, in this case healing. It's God's grace that saves; it's our faith that receives the healing.

Still, looking at a serpent statue on a pole to be saved from snakebite just seems kind of ridiculous, doesn't it? Maybe that's the point: it is ridiculous. It's ridiculous at least until we read the gospel of John. There Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Way back, more than a thousand years before Jesus was born, God the Father was already foreshadowing his plan to save humanity by the cross of Christ. What God did for a handful of Israelites through a bronze serpent on a pole, he would later do for all humanity with his only begotten Son on a cross. Isn't that amazing!

Why would He do this for us? Why would He send his own Son to die for wretches like you and me? Jesus explains: "For God so loved the world that he gave His only Son, that whosoever believes him shall not perish but have eternal life." It's love; it's grace. It's God's grace that forgives our complaining and stops our whining. It's God's grace that heals our wounds and promises us eternal life.

All the poisonous snakebites we've earned, all the fiery serpents that have attacked us without provocation, none of them can ultimately separate us for God's love and grace. No one can make God stop loving us, no matter what they say about us, no matter how much they complain. We have a Father who loves us; we are the "apple of his eye;" we are free and forgiven; we are secure in His amazing grace. Amen.