

Numbers 21:4-99 - “God’s Love in Action”

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I hope you all got a chance to read the statement of our Synodical President, Matthew Harrison, sent out to all the churches of the LCMS with regard to the Equality Act and it’s plan to put to death not only more children in the womb through abortion, but also to put to death our proclamation of God’s saving Word of truth (<https://blogs.lcms.org/2021/lcms-presidents-statement-on-the-equality-act/>). We’re going to continue to need all the strength of faith God gives us through His Word and the Lord’s Supper if, for the greater good, God allows the Equality Act, like He allowed the “*fiery serpents*” in Moses’ day, to infest this country.

For our greater good this morning, let me add a little background information to God’s use of the “*serpents*” in our OT reading. My intention is not to put you to sleep, but to continue to turn our lives of whining and worrying about things that are out of our control, to lives of faithful prayer and witness of our faith in our Triune God who is in control of all things for the good—for the salvation of all whom God will eventually turn from their sinful ways to Christ for salvation. And the more the LORD reminds us of His victory over all sin, death and the devil through the cross, the more He enables us to exercise our religious freedom to tell others this Good News no matter what the cost (which will be increasing in the days and years to come).

Our text speaks of Moses and the Israelites sometime after the LORD miraculously rescued them from slavery in Egypt. “*From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea [backwards instead of forwards], to go around the land of Edom.*” This caused the Israelites to become “*impatient.*”

Why were they going this long, seemingly backward way to the promised land, by going “*around the land of Edom*”? Because, as the Lord had told them earlier, the Edomites were descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, and God had made it clear that the Israelites were not to provoke the Edomites to war (Deuteronomy 2:4-6). It’s not that the people didn’t know this, it’s just that they didn’t agree with God. They were more concerned about what was good for them in this world than about what was good for others in the world to come.

Sound familiar? Have you ever considered that when we as God’s people whine and worry about something that has a negative effect on our lives in this world (like the Equality Act), and there’s no God pleasing way around it, it’s a way of rejecting God and His promise that He’s in control of even these bad things for the ultimate good—for the salvation of all whom He will eventually turn from their sinful ways to Christ for salvation? In our whining and worrying (and I’m certainly guilty of both) aren’t we forgetting who we are, who God is, and why we’re still here?

Not only are we sinners deserving of eternal death, we’re also children of God who have been set free from our sins and death through our baptism and God given faith in God’s love and forgiveness in Christ Jesus, and assured of an eternal future in paradise. Therefore, we have nothing to complain about! And the reason we’re still here in this fallen world, as God’s “*workmanship, created in Christ Jesus*” is for “*good works*” (Ephesians 2:10). Good works do not include whining and worrying, but our faithful prayers and witness of our faith in Jesus Christ.

To help the Israelites remember these same things, and turn their lives of whining and worrying to lives of faithful prayer and witness, “*the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people.*” The word “*fiery*” most likely refers to the burning effect of poison, which caused many of the Israelites to suffer and even die.

The “*fiery serpents*” also caused the surviving Israelites to remember God’s historic love and power to save them from serpents and death in the past; since the time of Adam and Eve to their more recent past in Egypt. This resulted in their cries for God to forgive their complaining impatience, and to help them—to renew a right spirit within them which trusts in the word and ways of God.

In answer to their, and Moses’ prayers, God instructed Moses to “*make a fiery serpent and set in on a pole.*” Then God also attached a promise to the serpent on the pole. “*Everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.*” Notice that God didn’t get rid of the serpents. Instead He said that “*everyone who is bitten [by the living serpents], when he sees it [the bronze/dead serpent on the pole], shall live.*”

There wasn’t anything magical about the serpent Moses made. He made it from bronze, a common element from the earth. The power to heal was in the word and promise of God, which He attached to the serpent on the pole. It was miraculous, something beyond the ability or control of man. And the people demonstrated their faith or lack of faith in God’s promise by either looking at the snake to be healed or not looking at it.

We have similar things happening today through God’s Word and Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. God attaches His promise of healing—the forgiveness of sins, to the common earthly elements of unleavened bread and wine. “*This is my body...this is my blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins*” (Matthew 26:26-28). These things remind us to the ultimate suffering and death of God’s Son, who took on our flesh and the poison of our sins, and defeated them all through His death on a cross.

While Jesus, for a moment, hung lifeless on a cross, like the lifeless serpent on the pole in Moses’ day, unlike the bronze serpent Jesus Christ rose from the dead and promised to be with us always to continue to give us His new and eternal life. Our Lord fulfills His promise today through His Word and Sacraments.

The stronger God makes our faith in this Good News, the more He turns our lives of whining and worrying about temporary things in this world, to lives of faithful prayer and witness in the midst of the slithering snakes in us and in things like the Equality Act, no matter what sacrifices we may have to make to do so.

As President Harrison reminds us, “No matter the course of this or any legislation, Christ will sustain His church.” So there is no need to panic or to be afraid to share the message of the cross with others. For “our hope is not in laws, Congress or courts,” which come and go. Our hope is in our eternal Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who continues to save and strengthen sinners like us through the Good News that, “*God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16). May God continue make us bold messengers of this Good News for Jesus’ namesake.

All glory be to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Children’s Message] I was talking a lot about serpents or snakes in the sermon. Do you see any snakes in the church? [The snake on the tree of knowledge of good and evil]. That snake reminds us of when the devil tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God and eat fruit from the tree that God told them not to eat. When they ate that fruit, that’s when they were poisoned by the devil.

Did they run to God for help? No. They ran away from God. That’s what the poison of the devil (sin) does to us whenever we disobey God and do something bad. Even though it may not look scary (like a comfy snake), it grabs ahold of us to take us away from God.

So, what does God do? He comes to save us by telling or reminding us about Jesus and what He did for us on the cross. Jesus set us free from the power and poison of the devil and all the bad things we and other people do to us by dying on the cross for our sins and rising from the dead to give us faith in Jesus as our Savior.

So now, when we’re tempted to do something wrong, or need help in any way, where does our God given faith take us? To Jesus and the Bible where He reminds us about His death and resurrection and His power to save us from all the bad things we and other people do.