

Rev. Dan Welch Lent 4 3-11-18

Text- Numbers 21: 4-9

“Are we there yet? How much longer?” Anyone who has ever taken a long road trip with children has heard those questions many, many times. They’re questions that spring from impatience, from boredom, and maybe even a lack of trust that the driver really knows where they’re going. It’s even worse when the questions, “Are we there yet? How much longer?” are voiced by more than just one child. If you have 2 or 3 or 4 impatient children, it really makes for a long ride for everyone. If you’re a parent it’s enough to make you start talking to yourself!

Now try to imagine that you had not 3 or 4 children or even a bus load of teenagers from First Lutheran on a mission trip to Idaho asking “Are we there yet? How much longer?” which actually did happen last summer by the way and will likely happen again on this summer’s mission trip! It’s all in good fun though! But try to imagine **2 million** children, teen-agers, and adults all complaining to you, “Are we there yet? How much longer?” And now you know how Moses from our Old Testament reading felt, as well as how the Lord God Himself felt. This was more than just impatience, this was disrespect, in fact, this was **unbelief**. As a result we see God disciplining the children of Israel by sending poisonous snakes into their camp for their sinful disrespect and unbelief!

But this story is much more than, “You better not make God angry or else He’ll punish you!” What we’re going to see this morning is that with the Lord, His discipline always has a loving purpose. First of all, this harsh action

turned the Israelites to repentance, and secondly, the snake on the pole pointed ahead to another deliverance from the poison of sin.

In a way, I think we can sympathize with the Israelites’ impatience. They hadn’t been in a car for 8 or 9 hours or even on a 24 hour bus ride across the upper Midwest. They had been on the road for **40 years!** A journey that should have only taken a few months was stretched into several decades because of the Israelites’ unbelief and rebellion. **Now**, near the end, they were getting extremely tired of their journey. They were finally on the home stretch. They were almost there to the Land of Canaan, the Promised Land. They just had to go through the land of their long lost distant cousins, the Edomites and then they’d finally be home.

But the Edomites refused the Israelites safe passage through their land. Apparently they weren’t in the mood for any family reunions. In truth, they didn’t trust their distant relatives. Also, maybe they still had hard feelings about how their ancestor Esau was swindled out of his birthright and blessing by the Israelites’ ancestor and Esau’s twin brother, Jacob. Whatever the reason for their distrust, what it meant for the Israelites, is that they now had to go even **further around** the land of the Edomites before they could make it to the Promised Land.

Can you blame the Israelites for being a little impatient? Would you and I have acted any differently? Imagine being a child in the back seat of the car and found out there’s been a change in plans. Instead of being a half an hour away from the campsite, you’re now suddenly 6

hours away. Now you're not a happy camper at all.

Speaking of childhood, I remember than when I was a boy and we had a dog named Sparky. I was in charge of feeding our little Chihuahua and Beagle mix. Whenever I filled her dog dish, I always kind of felt sorry for Sparky. She always got the same Purina dog chow day after day after day. (In fact I felt so sorry for her I would sneak her some of my vegetables at the dinner table just to give her a little variety in her diet!) Can you imagine if you and I had to eat the exact same food day after day after day? We'd probably start complaining, wouldn't we? And again, for 40 years the Israelites had the same diet day after day after day. The Lord miraculously provided manna during the morning and quail in the evening for them to eat. They never had to worry about food... and yet they complained. Our text records their complaining, whining words, "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!"

Imagine for a moment that you are God. And you give food, free of charge, to 2 million people so that they can eat every day for 40 years. And then they have the nerve to complain and say *that's* not good enough. How would you feel if you were the Lord?

God is not just an impersonal force somewhere out there. He is a real being Who has real feelings. How human beings act affects God. The Lord was saddened by this ingratitude on the part of the children of Israel. He had feelings of anger. Yet, amazingly, the Lord also harbored feelings of *love* toward these

people who were rejecting Him. He wanted to find a way to get them to appreciate Him and love Him and to keep them from destroying themselves by rejecting His love altogether and winding up in hell, separated from Him forever. Sending these snakes was His solution to this problem. This would wake them up to the seriousness of sin.

Sometimes *we* sadden God and anger Him by *our* impatience. Last Sunday in Bible class we talked a bit about how it's not easy to wait for our prayers to God to be answered. Is there anyone here who actually enjoys waiting? Whether it's waiting to find a new job, waiting to get over a sickness, waiting for report cards to come out, or waiting for an important letter to come in the mail... waiting, waiting, waiting. It's probably not your favorite thing to do. It's certainly not mine. In a way, we might even be saying to God, "Are we there yet? How much longer?" Yet so often in our lives the Lord calls on us to be patient, to wait, and to trust that He is going to take care of us.

Like the Israelites, we sometimes sadden God and anger Him by our lack of appreciation for His gifts. God has given you a nice home to live in, but you look at other people living in bigger houses and want that. The Lord gives you a car to drive, a real blessing when you know some people have to walk or bike to work, or get rides from somebody else, and yet that car or truck of yours just isn't quite as nice as you want. The Lord has blessed us by allowing us to live in the strongest and most prosperous country the world has ever known. So often we complain about so many things in life. When we do these things, aren't *we* basically saying,

“We detest this miserable food that you give us, God!”

Similar to the Israelites, sometimes the Lord will send us something to shake us up a bit. Again, these are really good things because they turn us around. They turn us from the greatest danger, falling away from faith in God and into the clutches of Satan. Sometimes, in our Lord’s great love and wisdom, He will send us some difficulty to discipline us, to shake us up a bit to get us refocused on what’s really important. Hardships have a way of helping us to realize the many blessings that the Lord has already given us.

God’s solution to the Israelites’ sin had another profound effect: It foreshadowed the sending of their Savior Who would also be lifted up on a pole. You see, this story isn’t so much about God punishing the Israelites as it is in Him providing an *escape* from the punishment they *deserved*. The Israelites realized that they were in the wrong. They came to Moses and confessed, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” The Lord then instructed Moses how to rid the Israelites of this punishment.

It was so easy. Moses made a snake out of bronze metal. He placed this snake up on a big pole, which probably had some sort of crossbar to hold the snake on there. The way to avoid the effects of the snake poison was simply to look at the bronze snake. If you looked and kept your focus on the bronze snake on the pole, you would not die. It wasn’t the act of looking at the snake that saved the Israelites, it was believing the promises of

God connected with that bronze emblem that saved them. Still, it was easy to do.

This leads us to how the story relates to us today. No matter what sin you have committed and no matter what problems you may have in life, God has given you a way out, through the promises of His Son, Jesus. It is to Him that all the promises of God point and it is in Him that all the promises of God for us are fulfilled. This is exactly what Jesus is saying in today’s Gospel lesson when He tells of how the event of the bronze serpent being lifted up on the pole was pointing ahead to how He would be lifted up. Just as the Israelites were saved by looking to that bronze serpent, so too all who believe in- who look to- Jesus Who was lifted up on the cross will have eternal life.

1500 years after the incident of the bronze snake and the Israelites in the wilderness, Jesus *would* be lifted up on a pole for all to see. Jesus Christ, God’s Son would be fixed to a pole with a crossbar. So now, whoever looked to Jesus in faith will live forever.

This is really where this whole episode of today’s Old Testament lesson hits home for us. God shows us that getting to heaven is so easy. We don’t follow a set of laws and rules. We’ve been saved by God’s grace and now we simply look with our eyes of faith to the cross of Jesus. As we look to the cross, we see God’s solution to the poison of sin that is coursing through our veins.

God could have punished the Israelites in some other way when they grumbled, but there was a reason He disciplined the way that He did. He needed to teach His people to appreciate what they had. He needed to give His

people a sign about how all other spiritual problems would eventually be taken care of. As far as forgiveness goes, we don't have to ask, "Are we there yet? How much longer?" See your sins nailed to the cross. See how God delivers the forgiveness for your sins to you through your Baptism, His Word, the Absolution of sins, and the Lord's Supper. These connect the cross to you today. So, look to the cross of Jesus, believe in Him and live... forever! Amen.