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Numbers 21,4-9

Lent 5 — 22 March 2015

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the first lesson from Numbers, the Fourth Book of Moses, which was read earlier:

So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: We truly live in a land of plenty. At times, it can almost seem overwhelming. We can go into large grocery stores and be overwhelmed not only at the size but also and the variety that confronts us. If we're in a store, we sometimes have to go from aisle to aisle just trying to find the things we're looking for.

We can truly be thankful for the variety from which we can choose. We know from the news that this variety does not exist in most countries. In fact, this variety did not exist for most of human history. Not only was choice limited, but at times even food itself was limited. Even today in some parts of the world, starvation is a reality for some people. Where such starvation exists, however, it is mostly due to war and strife; in other words, it is due to the actions of people. Sin is alive and well, unfortunately, as it has always been.

But even in our land of plenty, we can sometimes be dissatisfied with what we have. Probably the best illustration that immediately hits home is when *we* deal with children. I know from my own experience, sometimes children don't like what they have to eat. If we've ever had children, perhaps we can remember those times when they've said at the dinner table, "Oh, yuck, not that again!" And they either push the food away or go on to play elaborate games and pretend to eat, or try to sneak the food to the dog, or some such thing.

When I was growing up, I can remember my parents — usually my mother — saying something along the lines of, "Eat it. Think of all the starving people in" and then fill in the blank with some country in Asia or Africa.

But of course for children, that doesn't really matter. They aren't thinking of anyone else except themselves. They judge what is in front of them by looking at what they want. Their whole world revolves around them. If their likes are met, well and good; if their likes at the moment are not met, then comes the phrase "Yuck."

And that "Yuck" is a good illustration of an expression of sin as any. It reflects the *view* that the world revolves around me. It can lead to profound dissatisfaction not only with life itself, but also with God Himself and the daily bread which He gives. And considering that "Yuck," it leads to the theme for today's sermon, "**What Happens When One Says 'Yuck' To God?**" I'll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) Dissatisfaction And Grumbling**
- 2) Repentance And Life;** and,
- 3) The Upward Look**

1) Dissatisfaction And Grumbling. The Israelites, God’s Old Testament children, were dissatisfied and grumbled. In our reading for today, they had to make a detour to get to the Land of Promise. They had to go around Edom, a land where there was lots of good stuff to eat and drink, and go through a wilderness, a desert. In that wilderness, they again had to depend on God leading them and providing for them.

They had to depend on God providing not only water, but also bread. Now in the desert wanderings of Israel, God supplied something called Manna, or, the Bread of Heaven. It was a substance that appeared on the ground in the morning and had to be eaten that day or it spoiled. It quite literally forced the Israelites to depend on God for their daily bread; it couldn’t be stored up, but had to be used that very day – the one exception being the Sabbath Day.

Now they were on their detour in the Arabian desert. We do not know *how* much time passed, but they had become dissatisfied with God’s heavenly catering service.

Yes, they were going to a land of promise, but the food along the way was not to their liking. Indeed, they railed against Moses and God and thought that they might have been better off back in slavery in Egypt — at least the menu was a bit more varied.

Our text says that they became discouraged. Other translations say that they became “impatient,” or “restive” or, in German “wurde verdrossen,” or “vexed” or “grieved.” Regardless of the translation, we can say with certainty that they were not happy campers. But the phrase in the Hebrew version of the Bible says that “the soul of the people was short,” or, “their souls were shriveling up.”

This is quite the word picture, isn’t it? Can you imagine someone’s soul shriveling up? Growing smaller and smaller, harder and

harder, more and more dissatisfied? That is what was happening to the people of Israel. Every step they took was another soul-shrinking step. With every step, they became angrier and angrier. Finally they told Moses and God, “We hate this worthless food!” The only thing lacking was the word “Yuck!”

They all were like a self-centered child, completely dissatisfied with whatever was on the plate at the table. When the Israelites said that there was no water or no food, what they meant was that there was no water nor food that they liked.

In response to their grumbling, God plagued them with snakes whose bite was poisonous. These were fiery snakes, and we do not know whether “fiery” referred to their color or to the sting of their bite. It doesn’t matter; what does matter was that their bite was indeed fatal.

That was God’s immediate judgment on sin – a judgment on their cursing the daily bread that He had so graciously provided, on their cursing God Himself.

God punishes sin. Make no mistake. His judgment is sure. At times it comes immediately, as with this account of poisonous snakes in the wilderness, and at times it comes gradually. But with all of us, it will come one day; as the Scripture says, “It is appointed for man to die once, and then comes the judgment.” At that time, at the final judgment, God will open up our lives, and every secret thought shall be revealed, in addition to all the less than secret thoughts and actions. Nothing shall be hidden from His all-knowing gaze.

But to the children of Israel and us God gives us the chance for:

2) Repentance And Life. The snake bites, however, were a wake-up call to the Israelites. That hammer of judgment woke them to

the fact that they had indeed sinned, and they should repent and live.

The Israelites realized that they had sinned by speaking against God and Moses. They had sinned by letting their souls shrink to the point where they thought they could judge God rather than let God provide.

They called and they begged Moses to intercede with God on their behalf. Moses did and received some instructions from God. Moses was to fashion a bronze snake and put it atop a pole. Then, with pole raised above the camp of the Israelites, the Israelites who were bitten by a snake could look at the pole with the bronze serpent, and thus live instead of die.

They had taken the name of the Lord in vain. Rather than call upon the Lord's name in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks, they cursed and swore. Their punishment drove them to repent. To sorrow for their sin. To this end they asked Moses to intercede, probably because they didn't know what else to do.

God, however, didn't take the snakes away. Those little critters were still slithering about and biting. But what God did do was give a way of escape in the midst of a sure and certain death. He provided a way out. If after having been bitten, they looked at the bronze serpent on a pole, they lived.

In order to escape the consequences of sin, the Scriptures later speak about having:

3) The Upward Look. They lived if they had that upward look, to look up at the way of escape God had provided.

It is more than interesting that Jesus Himself compared Himself

with the bronze snake on a pole. No, Jesus didn't say he was a snake, but in a conversation with Nicodemus, a Jewish Bible scholar, Jesus did say that just "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up."

And Jesus was lifted up. He was lifted up on the Cross for our sins. He was lifted up because whenever our souls shrink, whenever we shrivel up inside, whenever we become so dissatisfied with what life offers us, we turn from praying, praising, and the giving of thanks to cursing and swearing, then sin is really alive and well within us.

We do not need advertising to tell us that at times life can seem to be better. The Israelites in the desert did not have advertising to tell them, for example, "You deserve a break today." or "Put a little spice in your life." Or, "Go for the gusto." Or any of a million advertising slogans.

People become bored with the regularity of life; they think it monotonous if there isn't variety. No variety, then dissatisfaction. Similar to the little kid who looks at his plate and says, "Yuck!"

Life can be filled with uncertainty. There can be the uncertainty of finances, the uncertainty of health, the uncertainty of employment. And our souls can shrivel; we can develop that inward look. We can be filled with resentment that life should be unfair, that we have been poorly treated, and we can be like King Lear, railing and shaking on the moors of Scotland and screaming that he was more sinned against than sinning. No different than saying, "Yuck."

But Jesus went on to speak about His being lifted up. Listen to the rest of what our Savior had to say;

as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the

Son of Man — that's Me, that's Jesus, I must — be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life. (John 3,14-15)

As in His death Jesus gazed down from the Cross, He invites us to take that upward look. In the midst of our life, when our souls are shrinking, are shriveling up, we are to look up at His Cross. In looking up we are to find the cure for our sin, for our dissatisfaction.

At the foot of the Cross we are to find forgiveness, we are to find restoration, we are to find healing, indeed, *we* are to find life itself.

God does not promise to take away our problems. He does promise us our daily bread, but it may not have the variety we are looking for. Has He promised everyone a Mercedes or Rolls-Royce instead of a Kia? Has He promised to give us lobsters instead of hamburger? Has He promised everyone health and a long life? Should all of us be blond, tall and beautiful?

But when we are tempted to rail and curse and swear, to bemoan our lot in life, Jesus would invite us to take that upward look. In His death and resurrection, we have the forgiveness for our sins. In His death, Jesus broke the power of sin, death, and the devil. After His resurrection He is now our Intercessor with God. In that upward look we are forgiven, for He has first looked at us.

Conclusion: There is a famous New Yorker cartoon. A boy is at the table with his parents, and he is pushing his plate away with the comment, "I say it's spinach, and I say the heck with it!" — actually, he used a stronger word than "heck."

All too often we are tempted to say "the heck with it." To look at life with our souls in the process of shrinking, just as happened with the ancient Israelites.

But as Jesus looks down at us, we are drawn to that upward look. The upward look where we find life in the face of death, forgiveness in the face of impenitence and resentment, and the renewal of our souls instead of them shriveling and becoming harder and more dissatisfied.

In Jesus we have satisfaction with our lives, for He gives us forgiveness and our daily bread.

In Jesus we have the abiding and life-giving love of God. Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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