Fourth Sunday in Lent

Sermon Text: Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:14-21

Ephesians 2:1-10

Date preached: March 18, 2012

“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, and his mercy endures forever.” Goodness and mercy signify God’s treatment toward us.

While it is true that God is good and merciful, God does not withhold his discipline when we go astray. The Israelites were an impatient group of people who had been delivered from slavery. Such people you’d expect would be grateful.

Yet they tired of the journey. Things were not happening fast enough. They wanted things to occur on their timeframe. They were not satisfied with the food provided. They questioned Moses’ leadership. They certainly did not expect this wilderness experience.

Now if we were to transport through time one of the Israelites to our time, he or she would be truly overwhelmed. While they may be overwhelmed by advances in many things, I wonder how our complaints would register in their ears.

Often times today, things don’t happen fast enough. We go out to restaurants and complain that our coffee or tea isn’t warm enough. Today’s leaders are often targets of mockery. There is a lack of respect for authority on many levels.

Now as the Israelites complained, they were disciplined through poisonous serpents that struck their heels frequently leading to death. Numbers 21:6 can be a very troubling verse for us. How could God send serpents to kill?

How could you do this God? Why does God allow this to happen? Those indeed are good questions. Yet, those questions frequently serve to deflect blame to where it appropriately falls. We are the ones who turn away from God. We are the ones who get ourselves in trouble. We are the ones who are responsible.

Such an inconvenient truth may be hard for us to swallow. This is not to say that every bad thing that happens is our fault; we do suffer from the sin of others around us. There are sufferings that leave us struggling for answers. Death is the enemy.

Yet in the midst of our suffering, as people of faith we are blessed with God’s perspective. New Testament professor, D.A. Carson in his book “How Long, O Lord” states,

“The God (Christians) know is a just God;…That means they do not have ready answers; they have instead, a reasonable confidence in the One who does have the answers and the power to impose them. God will have the last word; we dare to wait for it.”

God’s last word is life. God’s desire is for us to live. God was eager to save His people that as they repented, He instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent. The serpent of bronze would be lifted up that those stricken would look to it and be healed.

Jesus uses that same image for himself in John 3. We who suffer from our sins, we who taste death, we who deserve eternal punishment are recipients of our Lord’s goodness and mercy. We receive God’s abundant, gracious love that is deeper than we can fathom. God loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Through Christ, we who are dead because of our sins, we who are incapable of saving ourselves, we who have been disobedient, are bestowed the immeasurable riches of his grace as Paul describes in Ephesians 2:7.

This saving grace is a result of Christ’s faithfulness. He is the one to whom we look and believe in for our salvation. It is Christ who promises that those who believe in the name of the only Son of God will not be condemned.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, You have been saved by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. This message is not your own private secret, but a promise that is intended for the world, that people may receive this word and receive the same freedom of the Gospel that is yours in Christ.

Rooting in God’s abundant grace, we are set free to live a life of good works that, as Paul describes in Ephesians, “God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Good works have no saving value. Rather, acts of charity, mercy, kindness, love and so forth are to faith as heat and light are to a flame. Good works shine forth from faith, and give glory to God.

So as you heard it stated at each baptism, “Let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” AMEN.