

Lent 4

March 18, 2012

Text: Numbers 21: 4-9

Theme: "The Forgotten Art of Gratitude"

The people of Israel had been in the desert for a little while by the time our text from Numbers shows up. They had just rebelled yet again against the God who had led them out of Egypt because they refused to conquer the people of the land of Canaan. The people seemed too powerful and they had no confidence in God. Here they were on the brink of the promise – and they slunk away like miserable little cowards, hardly the warriors of God who had come to take possession of the land that God had given to them.

That was when God had had enough. He declared that none of the adults whom he had delivered from Egypt would ever see the Promised Land. Rather, they would wander in the desert for 40 years until the last of that generation was dead. After that they floundered around a little and got routed a couple of times and finally they called on God to be with them again and lo and behold – they had victory.

Immediately, they began speaking against God again. Once they complained that they had no food and now they complained about the manna and quail that God had sent them and that is where the poisonous snakes enter in to the equation. Does this remind you

of anyone? Church is boring. That pastor didn't come visit me when I was sick. I don't like organ music. All that church wants is money. That sermon was so long. The communion wine tastes horrible. That church is not very friendly. And that only address church. How about, my spouse is always at work, my kids won't do their homework, I want a new car, I'm too fat, thin, short, tall.

When we loath the gifts God has given us, we are loathing God. When we covet what God has given others, we curse God. It's not that it is wrong to desire something more. It is not that is wrong to ask God for something different. But we don't just ask. We demand and complain and whine and manipulate to get what we want, what we think we deserve. We display our loathing for God's good and gracious gifts that he has lavished upon us.

Poisonous snakes are a real attention getter. The snakes that the Lord sent to his grumbling people were a response to their loathing of his gifts of manna and quail. These snakes were fiery red and apparently their bite caused a horrendous burning and the flesh turned bright red like the snakes and eventually, after a great deal of agony, the victim would die.

When you and I display loathing for God's gifts, not only will he sometimes take those gifts away, but he will send something to replace them. The people demanded a king when God said that

Judges were fine. They got Saul, a crazy tyrant in the end.

Sometimes God gives you just what you ask for to teach you to rely on him. Jonah decided that his way was better and ended up in fish guts. King David took Bathsheba who was not his to take and his son died. God does not mess around.

But understand this. God never does these things to punish us. Jesus Christ was punished once and for all on the cross. All of our sins, including our sins of loathing were placed on Jesus when he suffered and died on the cross. But, God does continue to teach us and sometimes, depending on how thick we are, those lessons are painful. God is a responsible parent. He will not allow us to do what we want without consequences.

When a child is a spoiled rotten brat, it is not the child's fault. It is the parents' fault. They are the ones who have taught that child that he can manipulate every situation by throwing fits and being destructive. They are the ones who have encouraged that child to be selfish and always demand to have whatever she wants regardless of the cost to others. They are the ones who have neglected their duty in teaching their children to be loving, Christian people who respect and love themselves and willing sacrifice for others. God will not allow us to be spoiled children.

Moses was instructed to make the bronze serpent. Any who looked at it would not die from the snake bites. Please notice that it is not that they were not bitten! It is just that they would not die! They were still bitten because they needed to learn AGAIN to depend on God and not their own ingenuity. They still endured the excruciatingly painful bites and some no doubt out of hatred and loathing of God refused to look at the bronze serpent and they died. But those who looked to God's bronze serpent for healing lived and learned.

The body and blood of Jesus Christ are on the altar. The baptismal water flows over you. The Word is in the hymns, in the readings, in the holy liturgy. Look to God's gifts and live! How will we ever get past the diseases that attack us? How will we ever find the money to complete all the work that God has given us? How will we tell our coaches and bosses and teachers that worship and youth group are more important than sports, work and school? How will we say to our employers, "fire me if you must but God and my family come before your profit margin?" How will we overcome the loneliness and grief that envelopes us? Look to God's gifts and live!

It turns out that loathing is painful, but thanks be to God that it is not fatal. The gifts are here and, through them, God gives us the strength to overcome all adversity. Through them God gives us the

ability to move through trials and come out stronger. Through them God gives us the power to stop grumbling and start praising him for the miraculous gift of life that he has given us. And through them, when our exodus is over, God ushers us into the Promised Land – this time for good. It seems to me that gratitude is more in order than loathing.

Some people find it useful during Lent to give up something they enjoy to help remind them of the sacrifice Christ made for them on the cross. So what if we gave up complaining? What if we intentionally stopped whining about whatever it is we don't have and remember that were it not for God's work, we would not have eternal life and we would not have his powerful tools to help us in this walk through the wilderness? I think gratitude is an art form and it may be an art form that we are losing. As we become more and more an entitled society – entitled to a job, entitled to housing, entitled to healthcare, have we forgotten that these are all gifts from God to make our lives easier and more joyful? I wonder if we would have a different outlook on life as well if we spent more time thanking God and less time complaining and loathing.