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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Lent 4, Series B
Saturday, March 13th, 2021
Sunday, March 14th, 2021

Sermon: Not What You Asked For¹

Text: Numbers 21:4-9

Focus Statement: God provides for all of our needs of body and soul.

Function Statement: That they would receive all God's gifts with thanks and not grumbling.

Sermon Structure: Story Framed

Doctrinal Locus: "God certainly gives daily bread to everyone without our prayers, even to all evil people, but we pray in this petition that God would lead us to realize this and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving" (SC, Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. When I was growing up in Milwaukee, my parents owned a pizza restaurant. From the time I was 12 until I was 19, I worked for my parents, answering the phones, waiting on tables, rolling dough, topping pizzas, and watching the ovens. And what do you think I ate every night? You guessed it! *Pizza!* Night after night after night all we ever got to eat was pizza. Sure, there were occasions when we got lasagna or spaghetti or even a chicken sandwich. But 99% of the time it was just pizza. Now I know that probably sounds like a dream for some of you kids out there, but I hated it! It was good pizza—the best in town! But I couldn't stand pizza anymore! There were kids in poor families probably starving half to death, but I wanted to grumble and complain about a big meal. I had it better off than most, but I turned up my nose at what the Lord provided.

And isn't that exactly how we are? God gives us all kinds of gifts: "clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, [spouse] and children, land, animals, and all [we] have. He

¹ This is a major revision of an earlier sermon, which was preached on Sunday, March 22nd, 2009, at Immanuel Lutheran Church, in Englewood, Colorado. It also appears in my book, *In the Shadow of the Cross: Sermons for Lent and Holy Week* (2017), 79-83.

richly and daily provides [us] with all that [we] need to support this body and life” (SC, 1st Article of the Creed). God gives us all that we need—more than we deserve—and yet we snub our nose at it all the time. We want more money, a bigger house, and a much juicier steak. When we’re sitting at the mechanic waiting for another car repair, we envy our friend or neighbor with the brand-new Lexus. We grumble about our job or boss even when many of our neighbors are currently unemployed due to the pandemic, and countless others are underemployed. We complain that our clothes aren’t as cool or trendy as the popular kids’ at school, even though some other kids can’t even afford a coat to wear in the winter. No matter what God gives us, all too often it’s not good enough for our tastes. Looking at how little we have compared to how much we desire, we turn our eyes up to heaven and say, “This is *not* what I asked for!” So instead of thanking God for giving us our daily bread, we grumble as if maybe our *God* isn’t really even good enough for our tastes.

During the pandemic, we’ve become particularly good at grumbling. During the lockdowns and Covid restrictions, our patience has run out. And it doesn’t take much to set us off with an outcry of complaint.

Well, God has his own way of dealing with grumblers. And, as we discover in our Old Testament lesson, that’s not exactly what we’d ask for either. Numbers 21 takes place toward the end of Israel’s 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, the punishment for their parents’ refusal to enter the Promised Land (Numbers 13-14). For almost 40 years the Israelites did nothing but grumble and complain. They complained about their food. They complained about their water. They complained about their pastor, the prophet Moses. Even though God provided for all their needs day after day after day, they continued to complain about pretty much everything! And so when they heard that the Promised Land of Canaan was full of giants and

fortified cities, in their fear they complained that God brought them out of slavery in Egypt just to kill them in Canaan instead. God had had enough! So he condemned them to wander in the wilderness until that entire generation died off.

For 40 years they circled the Sinai Peninsula kicking over the same stones and drinking from the same oases year in, year out. Gradually, all the grumblers died off. But now, towards the end of those 40 years, we find that the apple didn't fall very far from the tree. In Numbers 21, Moses tells us that the new generation "became impatient on the way" (Num. 21:4, ESV).² Just like their parents, they were tired, their feet were worn out, and they were sick of eating *manna* for breakfast, *manna* for lunch, and *manna* for dinner. *Manna*, you might remember, was that sweet, flaky bread that probably looked and tasted a lot like Frosted Flakes.

So the people grumbled. They complained against God and against Moses, saying, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food" (Num. 21:5). They were getting towards the journey's end, but they were done. They grumbled and complained and acted as if somehow slavery in Egypt was better than the freedom and blessing that God had in store for them. At least in Egypt there was steak and salad! (cp. Num. 11:4-5). "This isn't what we asked for!" they declared. Even after everything God had done for them—crossing the Red Sea, water from the rock, and manna from heaven—nothing was good enough for these grumblers and complainers.

Worst of all, they grumbled "against God and against Moses" (Num. 21:5), complaining about the very leader called and put in place by God. We would do well to heed the warning from Hebrews 13: "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God.... Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Heb. 13:7, 17). Constant complaint does not help a pastor do his job better and is of no advantage to you. “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

God was angry about the ungrateful grumblers. So he did something about it. Yahweh sent fiery serpents to bite and sting them. If they didn’t want God’s food and didn’t want to go to the Promised Land, he’d be sure they didn’t make it. The venomous vipers wreaked havoc on the camp, striking whomever whenever they wanted. “And they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died” (Num 21:6). It puts a whole new spin on “the wages of sin are death” (Rom. 6:23a), doesn’t it?

When the people felt the sting of God’s Law—quite literally—from the fangs of the fiery serpents, they saw the error of their ways and confessed their sins to God. “We have sinned,” they said to Moses, “for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he takes away the serpents from us” (Num. 21:7). The people repented of their sins. They confessed their complaining to their pastor, and he prayed for their forgiveness.

And God did forgive them, only not in the way they expected. Instead of snapping his fingers and taking away the snakes just like that (**snap**), God told Moses to make a statue of a serpent out of bronze and to mount it on a pole. Then, if anyone was bitten by a snake, he could look to the bronze serpent and be saved. God saved the people—but not by taking the snakes away. If God just took the snakes away, the people would quickly go back to their old ways and find something else to groan about. But by giving them the bronze serpent, God required them to believe in him and trust his promise of forgiveness and life. The bronze serpent isn’t what they asked for, because it was something so much better.

That's how it is with us, too. We think we know what we want and need, and we're always asking God to give us something better than what we have. When he doesn't give it to us, we grumble and complain and figure that God doesn't bother about answering our prayers. But God *always* answers prayers—just not always in the way we expect. As Luther writes in the Small Catechism: “God certainly gives daily bread to everyone without our prayers, even to all evil people, but we pray in this petition that God would lead us to *realize* this and to receive our daily bread with *thanksgiving*” (SC, Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer). When God doesn't give us what we ask for, he gives us something better instead. When God doesn't say, “Yes,” and instead says, “No,” or “Wait,” it means that he has something better in mind than what we could imagine. Though it's hard to cling to the hope of a Promised Land we've never seen, it's better than going back to be slaves in Egypt. Sometimes it just takes a few snakes to remind us how much God has already given us.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul uses the story of the fiery serpents as a warning not to test God by our grumbling and complaining. He says, “We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer” (1 Cor. 10:10). But Jesus puts a whole different spin on this story. Instead of focusing on the fiery serpents, he focuses on the bronze serpent that Moses made.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus says, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15). Jesus compares himself to the bronze serpent. Just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness, so also Jesus was lifted up on the cross. Just as the Israelites were saved from the snakes by looking at the bronze serpent, so we are saved from our sins by looking

to the cross of Christ. For there we behold our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who died to forgive our sins. It may not be what we asked for, but Jesus is the best thing that God could ever give us.

And because he was lifted up on the “pole” of the cross, Christ defeated the slimiest snake of all: “that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (Rev. 12:9). In Genesis 3:15, in the first Gospel promise in Scripture, God foretold that one day a descendant of Eve would crush the head of the serpent who deceived Eve and tempted Adam to sin. “He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise. By his death and resurrection, he defeated the devil and crushed the head of the serpent. “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8b). And that’s what Jesus did for us.

Jesus gives us life and salvation, and in him God gives us everything we need. Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you” (John 16:23). And it will always be better than what you asked for, because “all the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor. 1:20). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen. And now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.