

Notes for Next Sunday

Fourth Sunday in Lent

The Point of this Week's Readings

Old Testament (Numbers 21:4-9). As Moses guides God's people in the direction of the Red Sea, away from their primary objective of the Promised Land, rebellion begins anew. Our lives also persist in the pattern of rebellion, repentance, and restoration. Those in Israel who repented received God's salvation by looking to the sign of His mercy in faith (v 9). What an excellent precursor of God's redemption through the cross. Those who look upon the cross in faith are saved.

Epistle (Ephesians 2:1-10). Judaizers threatened most early Christian communities, teaching that Gentiles had to obey the OT Law in addition to faith in Christ. But Paul insists that God saves both Jews and Gentiles by grace through faith, apart from any works. Today's self-help culture likewise tempts us to try to do it all ourselves.

Gospel (John 3:14-21). God gives His only Son as a sacrificial gift to deliver the world from condemnation and to give eternal life to those who believe in Him. When we continue in an immoral lifestyle, we naturally resist divine disclosure of our sin and thus our need for a Savior. Do not flee the light, but repent. God has revealed His strong love in His Son, Jesus Christ, to forgive your sins and give you life.

For more in-depth commentary on each reading, read the notes found after each text below.

OLD TESTAMENT – Numbers 21:4-9

⁴They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "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!" ⁶Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." ⁹So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

21:4 impatient. With Moses' determination not to engage Edom in battle, the people became impatient with him and with the direction the Lord was taking them. Flushed with victory, they were confident in themselves. They forgot that their victory over Arad was granted by the Lord in response to their solemn pledge (v. 2); now they were ready to rebel again. (CSB)

21:5 why have you brought us up out of Egypt. Egypt never looked so good as when the Israelites were in the desert. In the wilderness all they remember is the fleshpots of Egypt, not the whips and the bricks. They go even so far as to call Egypt a land flowing with milk and honey (Num 16:13). Once they had to slave for their bread under the lash. Now they pick up manna for free. But impatience has clouded their memory.

21:5 we detest this miserable food! The people's impatience (v. 4) led them to blaspheme God, to reject his servant Moses and to despise the bread from heaven. This is the most bitter of their several attacks on the manna. Just as Moses' attack on the rock was more than it appeared to be, so the people's contempt

for the heavenly bread was more serious than one might think. Rejecting the heavenly manna was tantamount to spurning God's grace. (CSB)

21:6 *fiery serpents*. Hbr *nechashim seraphim*; similar to the word for "bronze" The wordplay may refer to the shiny, metallic brown appearance of some species of adder. (TLSB)

21:7 *We have sinned*. A second time, the people resort to prayer, which shows they begin to understand the way of life in which the Lord will lead them: sin, repentance, restoration, and service. (TLSB)

21:8 *make a snake and put it up on a pole*. Israel had confessed its sin after a rebellion one other time in Numbers (14:40). But then they went out without the Lord's presence and were defeated (14:41-45). Their confession was shallow; they believed they could fulfill the promises of the Lord through their own efforts. This background of the earlier confession helps explain why the Lord does not simply get rid the serpents immediately. The bronze serpent by itself does not have the power to heal (as Israel mistakenly believed, 2 Kings 18:4). No, it is the serpent connected with the promise of the Lord that brings life.

EPISTLE – Ephesians 2:1-10

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

2:1 *you were dead*. A description of their past moral and spiritual condition, separated from the life of God. (CSB)

2:2 *used to live*. Imagine a person whose entire perspective on life had been shaped only by television programming. What would such a person's morality be like? (LL)

2:2 *ruler of the air*. This evil principle, the spirit of disobedience, is located, as it were in the air, is the spiritual atmosphere wherein they live, move, and breathe. It is nothing but sin, disobedience, unrighteousness that the men of this world spiritually inhale and exhale without ceasing. (Stoeckhardt)

2:3 *gratifying the cravings*. A few examples: Abortion, business corruption, cohabitation, homosexuality, political correctness (there is more than one truth), spiritual laxity among Christians.

2:3 *of our spiritual nature*. Paul here writes of a fallen nature without God. It is our natural tendency as sinners to do as sinners to do the wrong, to lay ourselves wide open to temptation and sin. Jesus described sins coming "from within, out of men's hearts." He said, "All these (sins) come from the inside...(Mark 7:20-23). That warped inside of us is our sinful nature. (LL)

2:4 *rich in mercy*. For no other reason, God has rescued men and women from death and given them life. God's mercy is his overflowing active compassion, freely exercised, excluding all idea of merit on the part of the object. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 10, Part 2)

2:5 when we were dead. Just as a dead body cannot raise itself to bodily, earthly life, so a person who by sin is spiritually dead cannot raise himself to spiritual life” (FC Ep. II 3). (TLSB)

2:7 incomparable. There is nothing in our present range of experience that can compare with heaven, so great is the love and mercy of our God, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. (PBC)

2:8 it is by grace. It is utter generosity, unselfish, spontaneous, recklessly prodigal generosity, which acts wholly out of loving concern for the other’s need, even if he is completely unworthy of the love and help thus offered him.

2:9 not by works. The only way good works could save us with a perfect and just God is if our whole life were perfect. God cannot accept a 99 percent morally perfect life. He requires 100 percent perfection. (LL)

2:10 workmanship. To be the product of someone who has very lovingly crafted something. We say that a craftsman communicates with his work so God continues to do so with us.

2:10 to do good works. God has much work for us to do. Good works are a crucial aspect of the Christian life. Our good works, however, become an expression of thankfulness for all Christ has done for us, not an attempt to win heaven. (LL)

GOSPEL – John 3:14-21

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son . ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been through God.

3:14 just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert. The bronze serpent was lifted up to make sport of the deadly serpents, as if it were a slain trophy. The Son was lifted up to make a public spectacle of the enemy, as if the defeated devil were on the cross. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 4, Part 2)

3:16 God so loved the world. Greek *agapao*, used repeatedly in John; God’s sacrificial and faithful love for the entire world alienated from God, that is, all humankind. (TLSB)

3:16 believes. To have faith in God. Found 90 times in John.

3:17 judge. We know that Christ will return in judgment, but at this time, Jesus doesn’t mention God’s alien work of condemning and crushing through the Law. Instead, he focuses completely on the unmerited favor God shows the world. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 18, Part 2)

3:18 believes ... does not believe. † John is not speaking of momentary beliefs and doubts but of continuing, settled faith. (CSB)