

30 March 2003  
Lent 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Snake Bit No More!”

Text: Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-17

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We heard in the Old Testament reading from Numbers: *“From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, ‘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.’ Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.”*

To fully appreciate what is happening here in the relationship between God and His people, you have to go all the way back to when this particular time in Israel’s life started – all the way back to the Exodus, when God rescued His people from their slavery and bondage to Pharaoh. And ever since that singularly great, defining event in Israel’s history, when God with His mighty hand and outstretched arm rescued His people, and freed them, and showed them who is really God and who is not – after God did all of this for His people, the people responded consistently and overwhelmingly in one way: they complained! They grumbled! Nothing was ever good enough for them. For consider the following litany of grumbling:

+ Just a couple of days out of Egypt, the people get to the Red Sea, see Pharaoh’s army off in the distance, and **grumble** – God brought us out here only to have us killed. But God rescued them, as you know.

+ Then just three days after witnessing this great miracle – *just three days later!* – as they are traveling through the wilderness, the **grumble** that they have no water – God brought us out here only to have us killed. But God gives them water.

+ A short time after that, their food supply begins to run low, and so they again **grumble** – God brought us out here only to have us starve to death. But God gives them food – the bread from heaven, manna, every day.

+ Shortly after that, they **grumble** again, and again, and again. They worry about water again, so they **grumble**. They're getting tired of eating manna everyday, so they **grumble**. They're having *so many* hardships, so they **grumble!** If only we were back in Egypt, they think! But God still takes care of His people, giving water and sending manna.

+ Not long after that, the people **grumble** because they want meat to eat. Then they get tired of Moses' leadership, so they **grumble** against him. Then they get to the edge of the Promised Land and finally see it, and what do they do? They **grumble** about how hard its going to be to go into it! So they turn around, and what do they do next? They **grumble** about a lack of water yet again!

Are you seeing a pattern emerge here? If there was one thing the people of Israel were pretty darn good at, it was grumbling! Grumbling because they were *dissatisfied*. Grumbling because they were *impatient*. Grumbling because they were *worried*. It seems as if they were always grumbling! . . . And so when we get to the Old Testament reading for today, from Numbers, and we find the people grumbling again, it seems as if God is, frankly, finally fed up! If you're a parent, you know you can only take so much grumbling before you break! And it seems as if God has gotten to that point, for in response to this latest outbreak of grumbling, He doesn't send water or more exciting food, but fiery serpents; biting serpents; poisonous serpents!

Are you ever like the people of Israel? Do you ever grumble against God? Sure you do! Its in our sinful, selfish nature – to *doubt* what God is doing in my life, to *worry* about what is happening in my life, to be *dissatisfied* with my lot in life, to be *impatient* with the speed at which God is working in my life. And we grumble. If not always with our mouths, then in our hearts and minds, against God. Wanting different, wanting better, wanting more, wanting to take matters into our own hands. Questioning God and His ways. Demanding answers, looking for whom we might blame, looking back and wondering, “*What if . . .*,” or, “*If only . . .*” **Grumbling**. . . . So should this Old Testament reading that we heard worry you? After all, look at what happened to the Israelites when they used up God's patience! What is going to happen to us?!

But God is not a God of the Law, a “tit for tat” God, giving us what we deserve. Good thing! No, when He disciplines, it is in order to save. The Law, Luther said, is His “alien” work, His “foreign” work, His “unnatural” work – it is showing mercy and love that is what God is really all about. That is God's proper work; that is what God *wants* to do. And so if He chastens, it is in order to heal. If He tests, it is in order to strengthen. He gives the Law to drive us to the Gospel.

And so while yes, God sent fiery serpents among His grumbling people, He also cannot hold back His mercy – just as He mercifully provided freedom, and water, and food, and guidance, and forgiveness to His people in the wilderness. And so when they turn in repentance, He heals them. Attaching His promise of healing and restoration to perhaps the least likely thing of all – the very thing that inflicted the people! Make a snake and put it on a pole, God told Moses, and when the people look at it, they will live and not die. But it was not the snake, or the pole, or Moses’ obedience that caused the healing or had any power to heal – it was God’s promise that He attached to that thing. And when the people looked at it and believed God’s promise, faith received the promised gift of healing.

And so too for us grumbling people, God has provided forgiveness and healing. It is as we heard in the Holy Gospel: ***“Just 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. For God so 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 His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.”*** Just as Moses lifted up the serpent on the pole, so we too have an object, a person, lifted up on a cross, and when we look at Christ crucified and believe God’s promise that in Jesus our sins are forgiven and we receive the gift of eternal life, faith receives the promised gift, and we are indeed forgiven and have eternal life. For God did not send His Son to be a new law-giver, ***“to condemn the world,”*** but to be merciful and gracious and abounding in love, ***“that the world might be saved through Him.”***

And what parallels there are between you and me and the people of Israel! God’s people were in bondage and slavery in Egypt, and we are born in bondage and slavery to sin. God rescued his people and washed away their captors through the waters of the Red Sea, and God rescued us and washed away our sin through the waters of Holy Baptism. God provided His people with bread from Heaven, manna, to eat, and water to drink during the time of their wandering, and He has provided us the true food and drink from Heaven – the spiritual food of His Son’s true body and blood in Holy Communion, for us to eat and drink in our sojourn here on earth. And as He led His people of Israel to the Promised Land of Canaan, so He is leading us to the true Promised Land of Heaven. What mercy God has shown us, in all that He has given to us – both physically and spiritually – even as we grumble and complain against Him; even as we are weak in faith, and filled with doubts and worries.

Because he knows how hard it is to be in the wilderness. He knows, because was there. The Son of God, our Saviour, out in the wilderness, alone, for 40 days with no food or drink, and being attacked by that fiery and poisonous serpent named Satan. And he took

those bites of Satan, for that is why He came. ***“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.”*** He gave Him to take our place. To take those fangs of Satan into His flesh, to take that poison and venom into His blood, to take our punishment in our place. Because there is punishment for our sins – God doesn’t just overlook them or excuse them! But it is punishment that we do not have to worry about, because its already been given to Jesus in our place on the cross. *All* the poison and venom of Satan, *all* the guilt of our sin, *all* the punishment – *all of it* was given to Jesus, instead of us. And He died because of it.

Now, if that was the end of the story, then Satan would have won, because He would still be able to kill and kill again, with His poison of sin and death. But as we move toward Easter, we know that after death is the victory of the resurrection, and that with His resurrection from death, Jesus has, in a sense, provided the antidote, the antivenin to Satan’s poison for us. And so when we are baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection, that antivenin is given to us and we are raised to a new life. When we eat and drink Jesus’ body and blood in Holy Communion, that antivenin is given to us. When we look at Jesus lifted high on the cross, faith receives the gifts attached to Jesus, His forgiveness and eternal life, and that antivenin is given to us. The bite of the serpent has been rendered harmless, and therefore we are safe and secure.

And the God who laid down His life to save us will see us through this life. The God who gave His only Son will not turn His back on us now. The God who is rich in mercy, is merciful to us, and will not withhold from us all that we need in this wilderness. So as we have been hearing in the Gradual all through this Lenten season, ***“Oh, come, let us fix our eyes on Jesus.”*** Fixing our eyes, just as the people of Israel did that day in the wilderness, and trusting the promise of God were saved from death. ***“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus”*** lifted high on the cross, for all who trust and believe in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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