

Jesu Juva

“Mean? No, Merciful”

Text: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21; Ephesians 2:1-10

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

Meanie! Ever hear that? You're a meanie! Parents, you hear it from your kids. Kids, you hear it from your friends. And if you're older, you hear it too - just in more sophisticated ways and with more sophisticated words, like: you're intolerant, you're a hater, you're a bigot. Now, we may be those things and as sinners we do things that are mean and inappropriate. But usually when you hear those things, it's simply because you're doing something someone else doesn't happen to like. And, in fact, what you're doing may be good, it may be right, it may even be loving and helpful. But they don't like it, so you're a meanie.

Well today, look how seemingly mean God is! We heard that *He sent fiery serpents* to attack His people in the wilderness and bite them. Well, many don't like that. It doesn't sound very nice. A loving God wouldn't do that. God's a meanie.

But here's the thing and here's the truth that God knew: *His people had already been bitten*, and by a serpent far more deadly than the ones He sent. For they had not just turned away from God but against God. They told Moses: God's not good. You and Him, you just brought us up out of Egypt to be even more mean to us than the Egyptians were, and *to die in this wilderness*. There's no food and no water and, oh yeah, this so-called food, this manna, you say God is giving us? We hate it.

Now, it hadn't been too long before this that God had sent the plagues upon the Egyptians, including the Passover. He got the Egyptians to release them from their slavery and even give them gold and silver on their way out. He led them through the Red Sea and closed it back up on the pursuing Pharaoh and his army. He gave them the manna to eat and water from a rock to drink. Whatever they needed, God provided for them. *So how could they turn against such a God? Because they got bit.* And that's also the only reason they were still in the wilderness, because they got bit and wouldn't believe God and go into the land He led them to, that He had promised to give them. They got bit, and it was killing them. Turning them against the God that gave them - and was still giving them - life.

They got bit by the same serpent that bit Adam and Eve in the Garden and did the same thing to them. Look at all that God had given them! A perfect and wonderful place to live, all the food you could ever want, peace and harmony with all of creation, and a perfect spouse, specially created just for them. *So how could they turn against such a*

*God? Because they got bit.* And it killed them. It turned them against the God that gave them - and was still giving them - life.

*Now how is it with you? Why aren't you more steadfast and constant in God's Word and prayer? Why is it sometimes so hard to come to church? Why do you have such a hard time believing God's Word? Why do you find it so hard to keep His commandments, or even believe that keeping them is good? Why do the opinions of the world that disagree with God's Word sound so good? Why do you doubt and worry about God's love for you and think you have to earn His favor? Why do you fear the world more than God? Why do you love things in the world more than God? Why do you trust the world more than God? **Because you got bit too.***

And just like those folks in the wilderness, the poison of sin now courses through our veins, turning us away from God and against God. And it's deadly. Physically and spiritually. Which is bad enough, but it's actually even worse than that, for in turning away from and against God, what are we turning to? What are we turning to when we like our sin and choose it? And so roll up our sleeves and say to the serpent: bite me again and again and again and so get our sin fix, whatever that is for you, that makes you feel good: the satisfaction of temper, of sexual satisfaction you're not meant to have outside of marriage, of gossip, of greed, of rebellion, of hate . . . what is it for you? What are we turning to when we think that sin can solve our problems and that following God's ways can't? What are we turning to when we are turning away from the God who has given us our life and everything we have? *What we are doing?*

Thankfully, God is not the kind of Father to let us just wander off, to go wherever we want and do whatever we want. He calls us back. He comes after us to bring us back.

And so in the wilderness He sent fiery serpents. *Mean? No, merciful.* His people were dying and He needed them to realize what they were doing and to turn back to Him in repentance and faith. Hard? You bet. But would anything less have turned His people back to Him? And when they did, God provided a cure, a way out, *by faith*. He didn't just wave His hand and make all the serpents go away. He didn't just speak and make everyone better again. He could have. But instead He told Moses *to make a serpent and put it on a pole*. And Moses did so. And then He attached His Word and promise to that serpent - that *if a serpent bit anyone . . . look at the bronze serpent and live*. They would live *by faith* in that promise of God.

That's what God had done with Adam and Eve as well. After they sinned and rebelled against Him He expelled them from the Garden and from that point on life was going to be most difficult for them. *Mean? No, merciful.* Because at the same time He gave them a Word and promise attached to the physical reality of child-bearing. That one day, one of the children born from Eve, descended from her, would defeat that serpent that bit

them and crush his head. And from that day on, they would live *by faith* in that promise of God.

And then God did it. He fulfilled His promise. We heard it today from John - that just like it was in the time of Moses, when the people got bit and Moses lifted up that serpent in the wilderness, God sent His Son to be that for us. God sent His Son, descended from Eve, so that we and all who are bit and dying look at Him up on that pole of the cross, and live. Looking not just with physical eyes, *but with the eyes of faith*, believing the Word and promise of God that because of Jesus we will live and not die. For, Jesus said, His Father didn't send Him *to condemn them world* - we were already that. We were already dying. We were already bit. The default is not that if God would just back off a bit I'd be alright or we'd be better off. The default is if God does nothing, if God doesn't act, then the world is a lot worse place than it already is; than sin has made it. And we're hopeless, lost, dead men walking. So no, He didn't come to condemn the world; He came that we may live. *That the world might be saved through Him*; through the anti-venin of the forgiveness of our sins.

Paul said the same thing in the Epistle. He said while you were dead in your trespasses and sins - spiritually dead after you were bit and had the poison of sin running through your veins - God stepped in and did something about it. *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us . . .* Great love, not small love or changing love, like we have. Great love, immoveable love, immeasurable love. *Because of the great love with which He loved us*, sent His only-begotten Son and *made us alive together with Christ*.

That is a love with which, quite frankly, we are unfamiliar for it is unlike any love on this earth. That God would give His Son for us, for sinners, for rebels, for garbage, when what we deserved was condemnation and death. And so the Scriptures call it grace, this love so completely and totally undeserved. *By grace*, Paul says - by this totally immeasurable and unimaginable love of God for you who do not deserve anything from Him - *by grace you have been saved through faith*. And then just to make sure you get it he adds: *and this is not your own doing*. Ya think? *It is the gift of God*.

It is the gift of God that He put His Son Jesus on the cross for you, and then attached to Him a Word and promise - that all who have been bitten by the satanic serpent, look at Him and live and not die. Believe that there is your sin and there is your forgiveness. There the Son of God takes the poison of all your bites. There is your future, if not for Him. But He took it to give you a real future. Life, not death.

Now, the people in the wilderness could have said to Moses: That's stupid! How can looking at your little snake on a pole help? How come you didn't pray harder? How come He didn't just kill all these serpents? How can you think that thing is going to help us - we have *real* needs here! That would have been sad, no? Yet that's exactly what some do

today with Jesus and His cross. That's stupid. We have *real* needs here! We need more than that. How can you think that is going to help us?

Because it does. Because that's where God put His Word and promise, and where His Word and promise are, there is life and every good. And so when we look to the word and promise of the cross in **Baptism**, we live. We die and rise there with Christ to a new life. When we look to the word and promise of the cross in the **Absolution**, we live. We receive the anti-venin of Christ's forgiveness. When we look to the word and promise of the cross in the **Word**, we live. We hear again of all that Jesus has done for us and all that our Father has promised us; we hear of His grace and inestimable love. And when we look to the word and promise of the cross in the **Lord's Supper**, we live. We eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour who gave Himself for us. And we live. For satan cannot have you when Jesus does. Satan cannot harm you when you are in Jesus.

Which doesn't mean he won't try to have you, he will. And that doesn't mean we won't wander too close and get bit again, we will. And that doesn't mean your Father in heaven won't send things into your life to keep you close to Him and focused on the cross, He will. He knows that you need them. Just like a parent disciplining their child, or a policeman pulling you over for speeding. *Mean? No, merciful.* The love that caused Him to send his only-begotten Son for you will let Him do no less.

And then He'll use you like a Moses. For as Paul concluded: for by this grace which has saved us, *we are* [also] *his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.* Which means that once the anti-venin of forgiveness is coursing through your veins, things change. You change. Like when you're sick and then the fever breaks, you get up and do things again, you live again, things get back to normal. So it is in Christ. With His forgiveness. It's back to normal, which is back to the way things were before sin. Not all the way to be sure, as long as we live in this life before Jesus comes again. But one day all the way. But still now different. Getting up and doing those good things we've been created for and to those whom God has given us. Not because we have to, but because we now can. Because of His healing, His forgiveness, His life. Being merciful, as our Father in heaven is merciful (Luke 6:36).

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