

"History, It's all about Sin and Grace"
Numbers 21:4-9
30 March Anno Domini 2003
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church of Emmett, Idaho
Pastor Michael L. McCoy

Grace, mercy and peace to you in the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Dear Baptized,

History. That word really gets a bad rap what with all those dates to memorize, places to remember, people to recall and events to put in chronological order. History. Why listen to the accounts of history or read the books of centuries long past? There are many reasons but this morning we consider but two of them, both concerning instruction. First, there is sin. Folks who are ignorant of history will not recognize a situation to be avoided and will, therefore, fall victim to their own foolishness or the collective sin of others. Second, there is grace. The individual who is without knowledge of what has taken place in the history of the world, will not know what to do or where to go when after the fall.

For example, the Apostle Paul wrote concerning the children of God in the wilderness and the consequences of their folly. He told the truth of history in order that the reader and the hearer of the Word might avoid evil and might know the grace of God. He wrote: "Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:11-12).

The sermon today is based upon the Old Testament Reading. Please listen to the text as we discover the truth of ...

... "History, It's all about Sin and Grace"

"From Mount Hor they set out by 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. And the people came to Moses, and said, 'We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD, that He take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.' So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live."

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God.

Now let's admit right up front here that the world and the majority of people in the world will deny

that history is all about sin and grace. The reality of sin against God is denied. For example, you will probably never, when taking a college final for World Civ, read something like this: "Compare and contrast the cultural climate, macroscopic trends and sociological practices of Sodom and 21st century United States. Extrapolate the latter concerning the future." Likewise the reality of the grace of God is met with quick objection. This should not surprise us, for when the transgression of God's will is not acknowledged, God's grace is not needed. There's no application of forgiveness in a world where sin is denied.

However, this morning we speak of the congregation and her children. They have been delivered from bondage through baptism and are their way to the promised land. But the congregation has not arrived yet and life is not easy in this wilderness. You know what I mean. Certain people become impatient and the grumbling begins. It doesn't stop there as the grumblers recruit others to join in the litany of the impatient. You know what I mean. Their complaint is against God and they don't really realize that He is not just distant from them, but present in His congregation. So they begin to rise up and speak against the pastor - that is, against their shepherd - that is, against Moses. Ah, history, it's certainly about sin.

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Now, notice what we learn from this historical account. The people of the congregation are not having their felt needs met and they are in the process of rejecting God and God's servant of the Word. Certainly this is a sin against the LORD God - the First Commandment - "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3). This unbelief is further manifested by the sin of coveting. The complainers wanted what they did not have and did not want what they did have. You know what I mean. The impatient grumblers stated that they coveted the food and water in the land of bondage, as well as loathing, the manna given from above. If the congregation could, they would have gone back down to the slave shacks of Egypt, climbed in their fetters, thrown away the keys, and died under the influence of other gods. This natural inclination to depart from the Presence of the LORD and go back to bondage is a proverb repeated by Peter when describing the fall from the faith by others, "It has happened to them according to the true proverb, 'The dog turns back to his own vomit, and the sow is washed only to wallow in the mire'" (2 Peter 2:22).

Ah, history, it's certainly about sin and the consequences of the same. But the LORD, in His mercy, had made certain that such a return was not possible. For the historical record informs us that "When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, 'Lest the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt'" (Exodus 13:17). Still, there were consequences. So, "then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people so that many people of Israel died." God permitted, therefore even sent, serpents with tongues of fire and bites of burning death.

The wages of sin is death and when one is taken from this world in judgment of his unbelief, another, in God's mercy, is left behind. The ones left behind behold double death and they tremble at the fiery serpents and the judgment of God. "And the people came to Moses, and said, 'We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD, that He take away the serpents from us.'" The people repent, that is, they have sorrow for their sins and they look to

God for salvation. Hopefully, you know what I mean. They come to their shepherd to confess their sins against God and God's undershepherd. They call upon this servant of the Word to announce God's forgiveness and to petition the LORD to take away the fiery serpents. They seek the LORD God Almighty's perfect absolution. Hence history, it's all about sin and grace.

Here it is that what happens is startling and unexpected. God simply can not take away sin without there being the punishment of the sin paid. In order to satisfy God's justice, the penalty of all sins must be dealt with, His wrath must be vented against the offender. Listen to what happened next. It is strange indeed, but it is marvelous to our ears. "So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.'"

Now that is astounding! Probably the last thing any of those people wanted to see and the last thing they expected was another fiery serpent. But that is exactly what the LORD God wanted each one and all to see, a fiery serpent. "So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live." What Good News! Here life is given where death ought to have been. Here one is restored to God when that one deserved to die forever. Hopefully you know what I mean.

But really, a fiery serpent fastened onto a pole? It's not even alive. How can it save anyone? It is as dead as the pole upon which it is fastened. Ah, please take a look at this lifted up one for it does not bite and from its mouth no poisons issues forth to slay. God Himself will provide the way to escape. He is the Savior, that is, He is named "Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). "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).

Dear baptized, lift up your eyes and behold the One lifted up in your place. He is on the cross and He spits no venom; rather He is absorbing the fiery wrath of God into Himself. The Son of God does not use His mouth to bite; rather He speaks to His Father concerning your forgiveness and your salvation which He has accomplished. And, in order for you to have life with God, Jesus the Christ must be pinned to His beam, hang upon the cross, die and be as dead as the pole upon which He is fastened. History, it's all about Sin and Grace.

That was and is the promise of God and when faith is focused on the promise then there is the blessing applied to the individual. "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). Just as the repentant members of the Exodus congregation were given life instead of death when they looked to the lifted up one in the wilderness, so also anyone today lifting up their eyes of faith and beholding Jesus on the cross.

We are reminded of the good, right and proper reason for having a crucifix instead of a bare cross. An empty cross is purported to be a symbol of the Resurrection and that Jesus is risen from the dead and no longer on the cross. But a bare cross lacks the reason for our salvation and ought to be as odd as Moses lifting up a pole in the wilderness without the fiery serpent fastened to it. A crucifix, that is, a cross with Christ on it, bears witness to your baptism. Or "do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death" (Romans 6:3). You "have been crucified with Christ" (Galatians 2:20).

Is there a danger in wearing a crucifix around the neck and having a crucifix on the altar? Certainly, you only have to recall your history. One can get all mixed up and begin to worship the that which is created instead of the Creator - to petition your pendant instead of God - to bow down to a bit of metal instead of the LORD - to turn the gift of God into an idol of man. For example, consider that bronze serpent on the pole. Centuries after it had been given as a much needed and truly wonderful gift to the church, it had to be destroyed. History informs us that Hezekiah "broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had burned incense to it; it was called Nehushta" (2 Kings 18:4).

But whether or not there is a crucifix on the altar, blessed is the congregation where and when the pastor proclaims from the pulpit what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth: "For I decided to know among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

History, it's all about sin and grace - in the world and for the world. This truth is given to the church to proclaim to the world that some within the world who are lost and hurting, suffering and crying out for help, might behold their lifted up Savior. As a result, we pray and we work, that the historical record be written that they, like you, entered into the church to hear that you are forgiven of all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.