

Lent 4, March 15, 2015

Watch out for that Snake!

Numbers 21:4–9



Dear Friends in Christ,

I think that we all have been through circumstances where what you have planned is derailed by obstacles that you find on your way. Either because things worked against you or what you did brought consequences that backfired on you.

You thought that your life was all planned out, yet you encountered obstacles that threatened your whole future, even perhaps your whole future seemed to go down the toilet!

I have been there and it is not an easy thing, especially when the alternatives seem so confusing and unclear that you begin to take things in your own hands and that in the end only complicates things. Some of you know what I'm talking about.

Others are probably going through that experience right now, and others will. The question is how are we going to respond to those situations? How are we to respond without complicating things for us in the short term but also in the long term?

What we do will certainly bring consequences some good some bad.

The People of Israel in our Old Testament reading were looking forward to the Promise Land. They were on their way.

Canaan was near! All was so good, so promising! Seniors were going to settle down and enjoy the rest of their lives. Young families were looking forward to their new homes so they will finish raising their families with a brighter future. Young people were looking forward to the realization of their dreams. Life could not get any better, there in Canaan!

But, then when things seemed so promising something happened along the way. As they were going they needed to cross the land of Edom. But as soon as they were near the border the King of Edom sent word that no, they could not cross their land. No way, not even if they could pay, which they offered to do. But still no! They couldn't cross Edom. So instead of seeking God's aid as they did anyway later on, the Israelites decided to take matters in their own hands, by taking a detour circling around the nation of Edom, on the road of Atharim.

But just before they left and continued with their journey another Canaanite king came and attacked them. Moses tells us: this king from "the Negeb, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, he fought against Israel, and took some of them captive." Just one thing after the other, isn't it!

But this time they did seek the Lord's guidance, from Numbers we hear: "And Israel vowed a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction." ³ And the LORD heeded the voice of Israel and gave over the Canaanites, and they devoted them and their cities to destruction."

Well, now things seemed to be better. At least for now! What can be worse? Well things did go worse for them. The route they chose to follow was the hardest and proved hostile with no water and food. Remember it was their choice to go there. But the text tells us: "And the people became impatient on the way.⁵ 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."

The Israelites were disappointed that God did not make things go according to their plan, so they became impatient with him! Their impatience turned into complaints, and their complaints turned into self-pity. And, sadly, all of that then turned into rebellion.

Of course, I think that we all know that God does not and will not tolerate rebellion. Sometimes, he acts right away, and sometimes, he doesn't, but he always addresses it! Count on that. In this case, God moved quickly! Immediately, he sent poisonous snakes to punish the people for their open rebellion. So, sure enough, the Israelites were snakebitten and many of them died.

By sending the snakes, God showed three things to the Israelites. First, he showed his just anger with them for their rejection of his grace and protection given to them for the past forty years and even before that.

Second, he wanted to show them (again!) that their own rebellious action was the direct cause of their problems. Remember, it was their rebellion forty years earlier that caused them to have to wander in the desert and not be able to proceed immediately from Egypt to the Promised Land!

And third, God brought the deadly snakes among them in an effort to show them their sin and lead them to repentance. He wanted to show them (again!) that their rebellion, their rejection of him, would lead to his rejection of them and their subsequent death apart from him in hell.

By now, you might be saying, "Well, that's a good story, but how does that affect me . . . in my life . . . right now? After all, that was several thousand years ago. What does it have to do with me at all?"

Friends, we can all take a lesson from our forefathers in this story. For we too more often than not encounter "Edom" and Canaanite Kings in our on journey that will prevent us from moving ahead according to plan. And not only prevent but threaten our very lives physically and spiritually.

What or who is the "Edom" or the "Canaanite king" that is blocking your way? Is there anything that has brought things to a halt and is causing you disappointment, maybe even despair?

I think we all have those situations no matter who you are. In fact today we do have a situation that has affected many in this congregation and by extent has affected the entire life of our congregation and of the Lutheran Church at large, and that is the problems with CEF. I do feel for so many of you who might lose a big chunk of your financial resources, I do feel for those whose income has been affected already because you live off your investments. This is bad! This is depressing, disappointing and causes us anger! That's the reality.

But there is more, as we have said previously it is hard to do Church work in the community as it is, but now it can be harder because of this situation, after all the eyes of those outside are upon us and more so when talk about money. That's the situation.

That's our present "Edom," that's the "Canaanite king" preventing us from reaching our goals and fulfilling our plans.

But there is more! CEF is affecting us all that is clear, but each one has also encountered things that have shaken our faith in one way or another, the death of a loved one for example! A terminal illness recently diagnosed, a broken family, and so on, can prove to be obstacles the "Edom" and "Canaanite king" we face in our journey.

The question is how are we going to deal with them? How are going to respond? Should we blame people, our leaders at the district office for the mess in the CEF? Should we blame God? Those things God has allowed, but why? Does God care for us? One thing is our religious practice but another is our money, isn't it the way sometimes it goes?

Friends, actions need to be taken to face our "Edom" and the "Canaanite king" in our way, that is clear. We must hold an institution accountable yes, but in all we do, say and even think, first and foremost we must seek God's direction in prayer, constant prayer, because we, too, often become impatient with God's timing. Because the sinful human flesh always wants to take matters into our own hands without first seeking God's direction through his Word and going to him in prayer.

And we, too—even if we do seek God's direction for our lives—often find ourselves ignoring his promises and striking out on our own. Here, you see, here is where we all enter this story. Just like the Israelites, we, too, go against God and his direction and leadership for our lives.

Let's be careful that we do not become impatient with God, or ignore the guiding of his Word in our lives, or complain about the lot he gives us. So we go our own way rather than follow God's clear direction and fully trust his promises.

The Israelites in the wilderness had rejected God and had determined to go their own way—apart from God. We have done the same in fact, and if not careful we could fall into the same problem again, and look at what happened to the Israelites, serpents attacked them.

Serpents, snakes can also attack us. So watch out for that snake!

Back then, God had sent the snakes among the Israelites in order to bring them back to repentance and faith in him. That was his ultimate goal, as it always is. God's goal wasn't to condemn them, but to save them. And his love for them was behind it all! It is amazing, isn't it, that He continued to love them in spite of their open rebellion!

The same happens to us even today. No, God doesn't send live snakes to call us back to Him, then again, maybe, but more than snakes God allows and uses adversity and the various problems that we experience, actually problems that we create ourselves, God uses to draw us back to him or keep us by his side.

Back then, so that the Israelites were healed of the snake bites another snake needed to be put in place. A bronze snake! All the dying Israelites had to do was to look at the bronze snake that he had directed Moses to lift up on a pole.

Those who looked at the bronze snake, not as a god, but as a symbol of God's promise and protection, were saved. Those who were dying were given life! Their faith in God—that he still loved them in spite of their rebellion—healed them and saved their lives.

The same with us! Our "Edom" and "Canaanite king" obstructing our journey can be, maybe have become already like snake bites that have poisoned us with sin, if so,

look, look up, there is also a Bronze Snake erected for us, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

As our Gospel reading says: “And 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” (Jn 3:14–15).

Jesus was lifted up on a cross to suffer the punishment, the condemnation, the eternal death that each of us should have received for our own rebellion. We, who were “snakebitten” with sin—our own sin—and were dying from those wounds, are now saved from an eternal death in hell just as surely as the Israelites were saved from death in the desert.

And just like God lead His people to safety he will do with us again through Jesus. Through him our future looks brighter. As Paul says, everything will turn out to be ok. “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (Roms.8:28)

Because of Jesus you and I will make it to the Promised Land, not on our own but He will be the one leading, guiding, protecting and caring for us all through our journey.

So dear friends, whatever are the obstacles we are facing today—the “Edom” and “Canaanite king” in our way, Jesus is for us.

Whatever snake bites we already have experienced, Jesus is for us.

Whatever disappointments, whatever despairs we are going through, Jesus is for us. Even if our future seems bleak even dark, let’s put our eyes and trust in Jesus Christ, raised for us on that cross for Calvary. Where He paid for our sins, where He bought us, where He claimed us to be His children.

Are you angry and at the verge of despair? Look up, look to the cross of Christ.

Are you snakebitten because of your sins? Look up, look to the cross of Christ, there you will find healing in the form of the forgiveness of your sins. Lets’ come and in repentance seek His love and grace.

Friends God is for us, He send His Son Jesus to be our forgiveness, our healing and our savior.

As we close this meditation I would like to leave this word with you, from Paul who said:

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:4–7).