

NUMBERS 21:4-9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 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 detest this miserable food.' Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

EPHESIANS 2:1-10

¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

John 3:14-21

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Children's message: a toy snake

- Talk about different pets
- Ask if anyone has a snake – show them toy snake.
- People like to scare other people with toy snakes – why so scary? They can bite you.
- You can get really sick – and you can even die.
- Story in Bible about Israelites being bitten by snakes. God told Moses to make a pole with a snake and when people looked at snake they were made well.

- Jesus says that we should look at him so that we get healed.
 - What did Jesus mean?
 - We all sin, but if we look us to Jesus, and believe in him, we will live.
- And it works, because when I look at Jesus I know that nothing can really hurt me,
- I know that he loves me so much and always will love me, and I have nothing to be afraid of.
- So whenever you sin, or whenever you're afraid, what should you do? LOOK TO JESUS, AND BE HEALED.

BELIEVE INTO JESUS

OUR PROPENSITY TO COVET

As most of you know, Hyesun and I share a car – you know this because I have asked some of you from time to time to give me a ride here or there. You see, Hyesun takes classes in Jersey two days a week and works in Jersey two days a week, making the car available to me only three days a week. You may ask why not just get another car, but when you have a son in college and you have your own debts to pay, it just isn't feasible at this time. I'm actually thinking of putting off the purchase of another vehicle least another year, maybe when James finishes his bachelor's degree. In the meantime Hyesun and I will be sharing our '98 Buick Regal.

The reason I bring this up is that I recently obtained rides from several of you, and I remember thinking to myself, as I'm riding down the road, "Boy, this car is quiet. And the ride is smooth." And then suddenly I found myself breaking the tenth commandment (Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's car); Then I thought about just getting my own new car. I thought, "Why am I sharing a '98 Buick Regal that has been known to make some funny sounds with my wife. Why don't I have a nice car like the one I'm riding in now?" I started thinking of all the nice cars I've seen, all the wonderful features – some people were telling me how wonderful it was to have heated seats in the winter...why can't I have a car with heated seats?

Well the truth is I could. I could head down to a car dealership today, show them proof that I have a job, show them what my bills are, and they would crunch some numbers, come tell me that they have wonderful news for me, and voila! I'm driving off the lot in a brand new 2015 Somethingorother...with heated seats. I'd be driving home with a big smile on my face. I might even park the car in the driveway instead of the garage, so my neighbors could see that I have a new car.

As I'm writing this, I'm imagining that new car shining against a picturesque background – a beach or mountains, pitched at a slight angle like in the commercials, and me behind wheel with sunglasses on and a big old smile on my face. Then I feel God tapping on shoulder; "Earth to Matt, are you there? Time for a reality check."

NEW LEVELS OF EXPECTATION

It's so easy for us to start dreaming about all those things that bring us such pleasure, not only what we drive but also what we watch on TV and what we eat for dinner. We are consumers par excellence, and over the years our tastes have become so refined that cooks and designers and engineers and inventors work hard to offer us something better, something newer, something

that will satisfy our ever-evolving appetites. And every generation reaches a new plateau in expectancy – we expect hundreds of channels of entertainment on our cable television, and we expect at least a forty-two inch high-definition screen. We expect to have a different menu for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and even a different dinner menu every night of the week. We expect our cars to have power steering and air conditioning. And when we receive less than what we've come to expect, we complain about it...

Just like the Israelites in our Old Testament reading, who lodge this rather absurd complaint, saying in the same sentence, "We have no food or water," and "we detest this miserable food." One commentator notes that this complaint sounds like something Yogi Berra might have said: "We have no food, and it tastes terrible." As humorous as this complaint is, I feel quite humbled with I think about it. I mean, within walking distance of the parsonage I can find such a variety of food, not only what you can get in a supermarket, but also restaurant food; there's Italian cuisine (of course), Japanese, Chinese, Scottish (McDonalds), Asian fusion, seafood, fast food, and umpteen others I'm sure. The Israelites has two choices; quail or manna or both, day in, day out, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I know that if I walked into Top Tomato for groceries and all they had was chicken and white bread I'd be a bit disappointed. I don't think we'd be any less upset than the Israelites.

Like the Israelites, we are drawn to the sensual pleasures – we want better food and nicer homes, even if it costs us our freedom. Back in Egypt they probably did eat better food and sleep in better homes, *but they were slaves*. How many people today sell themselves into slavery to creditors in order to have all those comforts and conveniences only to be chained with debt that won't go away. Creditors are well-aware of our propensity to spend beyond our means. Exporters like China know that we have a hunger for things. How many young men sell themselves to organized crime in order to get rich. Look at the cost – nothing less than their own souls.

PASSION'S OFFSPRING

We all have this hunger for things; in a sense we've all been bitten by a snake, and unless they come back to God and place their trust in him, they will die from the poison that courses through their veins. Paul explains this in our Epistle lesson; we were all dead in our sins. We are "passion's offspring" (which is a better translation of the Greek phrase that the NRSV renders "children of wrath." We're consumed by passions for things like power and recognition and popularity and fame and fortune and pleasure, and we can never get enough. We go into this downward spiral of trying to gain what we can't get, and that's not the life that God planned for us. But since we've turned our backs on God and deceived ourselves into believing that we can attain for ourselves what we need in order to live, we dwell in darkness and, as Paul puts it, we are dead in our sins, living lives that are spent in pointless pursuit of things that hardly matter. We're not satisfied with quail; we want steak and potatoes.

RESTORE TRUST IN GOD

Well if you're dead in sin as Paul puts it, you need to be resuscitated. You need to look upon the serpent on the pole, or the Savior on the cross. Jesus makes the connection for us in our Gospel reading: "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. I'm going to pick on the English translation again; a more concise translation of the Greek in this passage would be; "...whoever believes *into* him may have eternal life." The translations don't say "believe into him" because

it's a weird expression, but "believe into" would better express Jesus' meaning here. In English, to believe in something means simply to acknowledge something as a fact. A slave living in the South in the days leading up to the Civil War might believe in the Underground Railroad, that it existed and could help some slaves escape from bondage, but to believe into the Underground Railroad meant that you believed it could help you attain freedom, and you would do everything you could to connect with that railroad and gain your freedom. When Jesus says, "Believe into me," he means "look to me and believe that I can restore your life." Moses puts that serpent on the pole and raises it up, and when the Israelites gaze upon it, there's more than mere magic going on; the Israelites have already recognized their sin, their failure to trust God completely – that failure of trust is what caused them to complain and what made the snakes suddenly appear. Jesus is saying that we need to restore our trust in God.

And Jesus is quite literally the snake on the pole; he dies for our sin. He represents our sin as he dies on the cross, and as we gaze upon him on that cross, we should see our own sin being swept away, and our life is restored. We see how far God is willing to go to prove his love for us and his desire to forgive us, to redeem us, to restore us to life. We were dead in sin, but now, through Christ, as we believe into Christ, we are given new life.

And it's a bit tricky truly living into Christ, isn't it? To walk through this world of sin and temptation and have total trust in Christ is a challenge. We offer lip service to Christ, claiming to have faith, but we're still careful to ensure that our own needs are met before thinking about others' needs, making sure that we are comfortable before working to comfort others. We're much like the would-be disciple who says to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go," to which Jesus responds, "foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." In other words, Jesus is asking, "Do you really mean what you're saying? Are you truly willing to be my disciple? Are you willing to put that kind of faith in me?"

My prayer is that you would. Many of you may be, at this moment, feeling like your faith falls short of what it should be, that you've been believing "in" Jesus without really believing "into" Jesus, that you're still stuck on caring for your personal needs. You're looking for more than quail or manna, and you'll only start to really serve God once you get that steak and potato.

Anyone who takes a long journey on foot knows that you can't carry a huge variety of food with you – assorted nuts and dried berries and fruits and grains, maybe some beef jerky. That's the sacrifice you make if you want to reach your destination, if you want to reach the Promised Land, you have to get used to quail and manna, and be content that God is meeting your needs.