

God Makes Us Alive

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT [b]

March 11, 2018

NUMBERS 21:4-9

⁴ 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. 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." ⁶ Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷ 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. ⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

In the way of his Gospel, the Lord works toward the sinner not in force or pressure, but in kindness and gentleness—a Lord sending his only begotten Son into the world to be with sinners and speak grace to them.

In the way of his Gospel, the Lord works toward you and me never by force or coercion, but in generosity and the giving of gifts—a Lord sending his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world would be saved through him.

The way of the Law is the way of force and pressure and coercion. We're expecting that. That God is holy and just, and that the sinner is unclean and without excuse, this leaves nothing but the condemnation of the Law for the sinner.

So we're expecting that. Even pagan religions can speak of God's retribution and speak of what we must do to get ourselves right with God. A righteous, all-powerful God coming in judgment and pressure and coercion against the sinner, this is assumed. The Law does not surprise.

But in the Gospel, God is coming to the sinner in a way that our world could never predict and does not understand. The Gospel is a surprise. In the way of the Gospel, God is coming in kindness and gentleness, coming to us in ways of lowliness and weakness, so that God coming to us in his Gospel does not destroy us, brings no pressure to us, and never comes to coerce.

So when the Israelites sinned against God and deserved nothing from God but judgment and power, they did get that. Numbers 21:4:

⁴ 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. 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." ⁶ Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.

God *will* act toward us according to his Law. It will be with judgment and power, with pressure and coercion.

But that is not the way God wants to act toward us. It is not who he is. It is a work outside of himself, a work alien to him, which he does in order to have his judgment and coercion finally drive us to the proper hopelessness we should have under the Law.

But it is not who God is. Who God is, is love: For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever has faith in him will not be destroyed, but will have eternal life.

So we may think of God as coming to us in his Law, and him coming to us in his Gospel. Coming to us not in the way he desires, bringing condemnation, and coming to us in the way he does desire, bringing grace and life.

When God comes in his Law, there is only one thing for the sinner to do: Confess the sin, call on the Name of the Lord, and pray to the Lord that he forgive the sin. Numbers 21:7:

⁷ 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.”

Then the Lord does what he most wants to do. He does what is natural and proper to who he is. He does what he has promised to do on oath of his own Name. He forgives the sinner.

But this is where we can watch how our Lord does this. If in his Law the Lord is accusing the sinner and coming against the sinner in power and coercion, in his Gospel the Lord is coming to the sinner in the way of gentleness and lowliness, bringing grace.

So because it is not the power and coercion of the Law, this delivery of the Gospel, we find, is God coming to us using lowly and common instruments. If the condemnation of the Law comes by lightning and storm, by fire and brimstone, by poisonous serpents, by sickness and death, what will it look like when it's not the Law coming at us, but the Gospel?

It will look like God telling Moses to set an instrument in front of the Israelites, so that by faith in that instrument, they are receiving what is proper to God, what he wants to give: life. Numbers 21:8:

So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Will the Lord really bring the gift of life to his people using the common earthly element of bronze? Bronze, used to make their pots and pans, their shovels and rakes, will the Lord use something so common to bring life to the sinner.

A pole of wood, probably nothing more than some scrubby cedar tree Moses cut down, the same wood used to build a campfire or hold up a tent door, will this wood become the means for delivering to the sinner the fullness of God's grace?

Even the mouth of Moses! Moses has his own problems. He's been implicated in a murder or at least a man-slaughter charge; he hasn't done well in bringing his own sons up in the faith, everyone can see his flaws—will God use even the mouth of Moses to bring intercession for the sinner and to speak God's Gospel to the sinner?

Common bronze, common wood, common Moses—this is God working in his way of the Gospel. No force or coercion or pressure, but only the handing out of eternal gifts. And when it is the Gospel, when it is undeserved grace, it will come in weakness and lowliness, so that the sinner can see it without being consumed, can touch it without being destroyed, can hear it without running as from thunder, and can receive it not by coercion, but by faith.

So the Catechism, in speaking of how God comes to the sinner not to condemn the sinner but to save, says,

Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God's command and combined with God's Word.

God binds his Word to a simple, lowly, earthly element, and that element becomes a sacrament—a forgiving, life-giving gift from holy God.

As he bound his Word and promise to that hunk of bronze, and to that common wooden pole, and to that mouth of Moses, and made them instruments for cleansing the sinner and bringing life, so God has bound his Word and promise to the common water, to the everyday bread and wine, to the mouth of a lowly pastor, and through those instruments he is doing just what he says and promises.

He is binding his Name to the sinner in Baptism, promising to be with him or her every day, even until the end of the ages.

His is coming to the sinner in his Body and Blood, forgiving sin and cleansing the conscience. He is having the same Word spoken on Earth which is being spoken in Heaven, and that word is that your sins are forgiven, you are saved not by your works or decisions, but by grace. That is what is proper to God, what he most wants to do.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.