

WHEN IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE SALVATION NUM 21:4-9
FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT MAR 15, 2015

⁴From 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. ⁵And 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." ⁶Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷And 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. ⁸And 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." ⁹So 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.

When food companies are developing new products
they will sometimes do blind taste tests
where people are actually blindfolded,
because as we have learned to eat, we learn to associate
certain kinds of appearance with certain tastes.
And what we expect something to taste like can effect
how we think it actually tastes.
You know, long the way in learning what to eat,
children may sometimes absolutely refuse to even taste
something that doesn't look like what they like to eat.
But just as is possible for something to look really appetizing
but actually taste disgusting
Other food could appear disgusting: runny, slimy, off color,
but actually taste delicious.
I don't know exactly what the manna looked like
that God fed Israel in the wilderness, but it is apparent
that the people lost their appetite
for what was actually good for them.
This was just one symptom of their concluding
that what God was doing for them didn't look good.
It didn't look like salvation.
The same thing can happen in our lives.
On one hand, Devil is very good artist, an expert at making
temptations to be dishonest, selfish, promiscuous, etc.
look like something very good for us
when, in fact, it is the opposite, very bad for us.

On the other hand, God, who wants us to faithfully trust him may work in ways that don't appear to be good at all but are actually his way of working our salvation.

GOD'S GIFTS ARE SEEN AS INSUFFICIENT
until PEOPLE SEE THAT THEY ARE SINFUL
and GOD SHOWS HE IS CONSTANTLY SAVING

GOD'S GIFTS ARE SEEN AS INSUFFICIENT

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."

Let's examine these complaints.

The "worthless" food they complained about was the manna that had been keeping them alive for almost 40 years.

When it first appeared, Bible lists different ways to fix it.

It could be baked, boiled, fried, whatever.

Maybe it was like tofu, which is very nutritious, you can fix it in all kinds of ways. But it is still tofu.

And, they say, they had no water. In fact, just before this they had been at place with no water and for second time Moses had struck a rock with his staff & water flowed out.

So they did have water, miraculous water, but this time God told Moses to simply speak to the rock so he got in trouble with God which probably made everyone feel bad.

v. 4 says they were going around land of Edom.

In chapter before this, when Canaanites blocked their way God had given them victory over them.

But when Edom wouldn't let them pass through, God said not to fight but to go around because they were relatives.

v. 4 mentions they had camped at Mt. Hor on road to Red Sea.

They had camped at this same spot at beginning of journey.

It seemed they were going in circles, getting nowhere and were no better off than when slaves in Egypt.

Their patience was wearing thin.

So what do we see? God was doing miracles for them.

They had miraculous freedom, miraculous water, miraculous food & miraculous deliverance from enemies

but even when problems were solved, some bad feelings
were left that they didn't totally get over.
Same can happen for us. God constantly does wonderful things
providing for us, protecting us, helping us recover
but because it is so constant, we take it for granted
and even when problems are taken care of, we may hold to
bad feelings about having problem in first place.
What God is doing for us doesn't look like salvation to us
and we get tired of "worthless" food.

PEOPLE SEE THAT THEY ARE SINFUL

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."

Now, why had they been so long in snake infested wilderness,
eating manna for years and years, wandering in circles,
coming to places with no water, running into enemies
instead of being in land God had promised them?
It is because when they had gotten there years ago,
instead of trusting God and entering into it,
they had rebelled against him. They were sinful.
Sin always starts with not believing God's word & promises.
But they didn't see themselves as sinful,
they didn't see how their problems were caused
by mistakes and things they had done wrong
and so even when God took care of their problems,
they did not see him as loving and gracious.
Before it looked like they might as well still be in Egypt,
it couldn't get any worse.

Now God is turning them into Minnesotans: "could be worse"
This reminds me of when my mother used to say,
when we were whining and fussing,
"Stop crying or I will give you something to cry about."
This may not sound loving, as God may not appear to be loving
when he sends fiery serpents that bite and kill people.
Literal word in original language is "shining" serpents.
These shining serpents work like a mirror,
causing people to see themselves as they really are.
We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD

So what were they do to? Only once before in book of Leviticus had they actually said, "We have sinned against God" when God said they would spend 40 years in wilderness. That time they tried to make up for their sin by going in to take over promised land after all, by their own doing, and they miserably failed. As Paul says in today's Epistle: It is by grace we are saved, not by works. This time they pray to God for help. We too have a hard time seeing ourselves as sinful and have hard time seeing how this makes life worse, but when we do, and pray to God for help,

GOD SHOWS HE IS CONSTANTLY SAVING

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.

Now that is really bizzare. A bronze serpent on a pole doesn't look like salvation. When the people repent they say, pray that God would take away the snakes. That seems to make sense. This is what God does before when plagues cause Pharaoh to give up & say take frogs away, God took them away. But what happened then? He became stubborn again. This time, God doesn't take the problem of the snakes away but instead provides an ongoing cure that at same time is constant reminder of why they need it. Every time they look up at the snake on the pole they see this is what they deserve but then they are healed. How does this work? It works for only one reason, because God says so. And so they must learn to trust God's word no matter what because not believing God is cause of their problems. As gospel reading says, he who believes is saved but he who does not believe is condemned already. As Jesus says, this is ultimately true of him. When we don't trust God's word and don't see how he is so constantly and wonderfully providing all we need we end up being bitten by Satan's temptations which results in death.

We cannot do anything to save ourselves but God saves us
by Jesus being lifted up on the cross & dying for us.
Death on a pole. How does that look like salvation?
As Paul said in last week's reading, the cross is scandal.
But it saves us because God says it does.
When we look to Jesus on the cross we see
that is what I deserve, death.
But we see the gracious love of God, that he took
sin and death away from me & gave it to Jesus instead.
God unites me with Jesus' death & resurrection & washes away
my sin by pouring out miraculous water of holy baptism.
To human eyes, that water may not look like salvation
but it saves life because God's word says it does.
God constantly gives me the cure for my sin and death
by giving me Jesus' own body & blood in Holy Communion.
This bread and wine may not look like salvation
but it is because God's word says it is.
When I look to Jesus and believe what he says in his word,
I see that God looks at me differently because of him
and so I look at all of life differently.
Like people of Israel, God brings me through many troubles
and sometimes it may not look like I am going to make it
And so I may look at what is happening to me and think,
This doesn't look like the salvation God promised me.
but I trust God's word that it is
because like the serpents, God may not take away troubles
but is constantly saving me from them.
And so I can trust God's word that because of Jesus
I am indeed being brought to the promised land.

GOD'S GIFTS ARE SEEN AS INSUFFICIENT

when we get so used to them we fail to see them
as miraculous and gracious

PEOPLE SEE THAT THEY ARE SINFUL

when troubles remind them of the sin of doubting God
and of their need to trust in him alone for help.

GOD SHOWS HE IS CONSTANTLY SAVING

from our continuing troubles by Jesus taking our death
on the cross and constantly giving forgiveness & new life
through his word & sacraments to those who believe in him.