

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 22, 2009

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalms 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I have heard it said that it is the privilege of old age to become nostalgic, to reminisce, and to tell stories. I hope that is true, because I am about to become nostalgic, reminisce, and tell a story, a story about my admittedly eccentric family.

Actually, my grandparents weren't eccentric at all. They came to this country from Norway in the early years of the last century and settled in Chicago as did many, many Scandinavians. Somehow they were caught up in the emotional religious fervor that was common in the Midwest in those years. As I recall, they actually had fifteen commandments, the usual ten that we all keep, plus five: drinking, smoking, card playing, dancing, and something called mixed bathing, that was never adequately explained to me as a child.

I do not know what they thought would happen if they actually broke any of those fifteen commandments. I doubt that they expected flaming, poisonous serpents to fall on the northwest side of Chicago, but there was certainly a precedent – and it's in this morning's lessons. There are the people of Israel wandering around in the desert. We all know the story about how they came to be there, the story of Exodus, God's rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, leading them out as His own free people.

We all know the story; however, they, apparently have forgotten. It didn't take long. Now they are griping, "We're hot; we're tired; we're hungry; we're not having any fun"; the phrase "are we there yet?" is for the future. It's called ingratitude; it's a failure to give thanks to God; it's called a separation from God; it's called sin.

Sin has its price. Here the price of sin is a rain of nasty, flaming snakes, but it could be many other things. We all have our own fiery serpents to deal with – the point being that although we may forget all that God has done, God does not fail to see what we are doing.

What is the antidote for fiery serpents; what is the corrective for sin? It's the image that God raises up before their eyes.

Leaping forward, what, or who, for us Christians is it that is raised up? It is Jesus, of course. Jesus was "lifted up" from the water of the Jordan and proclaimed by the Holy Spirit, proclaimed by God to be the Son of God, the Divine Incarnate.

Jesus was "lifted up" on the Cross, sacrificing Himself for us, for you and me, in atonement for those sins, the sins of the world. He calls from the Cross, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." He calls for forgiveness not just for the Jewish rulers who have brought Him there or for the soldiers of Rome, but for us all.

Jesus is "lifted up" from the tomb in absolute, incontrovertible proof that God has power even over death itself, and that we, you and I, just as we share in the atonement, share in the power of His Resurrection to eternal life.

Jesus is "lifted up" to the side of God the Father in His Ascension; He precedes us there as a foretaste of our own eternal life in the presence of God.

All of which is to say that "Our Lord Jesus Christ did not come into the world to condemn the world, but to save it." He comes to save us

all, even if we are wandering around in our own metaphorical desert, griping and forgetting what God has done for us, what God is doing for us every day.

It's a gift: God's Grace is a gift. Paul tells the Christians at Ephesus "You have been made alive," and we might interject eternally alive, "with Christ; saved by Grace," saved by a gift from God.

"By Grace we have been saved through faith . . . and raised up with Christ, seated in heavenly places."

All this is not a reward for our good works; we have been created to do good works. It's our job. All this is the mercy of God, deserved or not, because He loves us.

In His Holy Name.