

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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March 26, 2006
4th Sunday in Lent
Numbers 21:4-9
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Numbers 21:4-9
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 38
Second Lesson: Ephesians 2:4-10
Gospel: John 3:14-21

Keep Looking Up

Up and down—we don't just use it to describe elevators and their function, do we? Someone looks depressed and we say they look "down in the mouth." We tell them to keep their chin up. If someone is acting elated, we say they are "sky high" or something along those lines. We use the phrase "up and down" at times to talk about our emotions, right? How we face things in life—things trouble us and we are down. If things go well, we are up.

This morning as we consider these words from the Book of Numbers, our Lord encourages us in our life of faith to keep looking up. It sounds simple enough, but there are enough things that we are going to face in life that are going to make us down, down in the mouth even. There will be things that are going to trouble us and worry us even in our life of faith. But God reminds us to keep looking up. Keep looking up even when there is trouble so that we see God's loving discipline and so that we see that there is a purpose. So that we see someone outside of ourselves to help us get through it because as we keep looking up, we will always be able to see God's divine mercy and we will be able to put our trust in that divine mercy.

"Keep looking up" is an interesting choice of words in regards to this story that we are told from the history of the children of Israel, right? Do you think that they literally wanted to be looking up as there are those snakes crawling over their toes? Naturally they are going to be looking down, right? Why? What brought about these snakes? We are told that they were going from *Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom*. Where the children of history are in their history right now is that they had wandered through the wilderness almost 40 years. For 40 years God had taken care of them. He had given them manna and quail. He had given them water from a rock. He had done all these various things to sustain and support them and in fact, we are told that their clothes didn't even wear out after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. But now that they had gotten so close to the Promised Land, the king of Edom wouldn't let them go through the land, so they had to go around.

None of us enjoy a detour, do we? If we are in a hurry to get some place, do you enjoy it and say, "This is nice. We get to see new territory." If you are in a hurry, you are angry and you are muttering and you are sputtering under your breath as you are on that detour on the road, right? Now you might get a little better understanding of what they are thinking.

The Promised Land was right there. They could almost see it, but now they have to make this big, long detour to go around the kingdom of Edom so they don't have to fight them because that is what the Lord told them to do. Once again it felt like they were going back to what they had been doing for those last 40 years. They didn't want to do it anymore. So the people start saying to Moses, *"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert?"* They say "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree", right? This is the next generation that had heard some of these complaints from their fathers and mothers. It is a wonderful reminder that our children certainly pick up all of our bad habits, don't they?

"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert?" "Weren't there enough graves there? The food stinks. The water stinks. Everything stinks. I would rather be back in Egypt." They were just repeating what they had heard from their forefathers. The people took their focus off of God and his promises that he was about to give them, the Promised Land, and just focused on what they could see right in front of them, right? "We have to make a long detour. I don't want to make a long detour. I am sick of sand between my toes. I want to go to the land of milk and honey."

Aren't those the same problems we face at times? We take our focus off of God and off of his promises and put it on whatever is worrying us or troubling us or whatever difficulty we are facing right now. We forget the promises God has made to us. If we forget the promises God has made to us and look at ourselves or look in other directions (look to the world around us, look in different things), the danger is that the devil can drive that wedge real far between us and God so that we can lose faith. So sometimes the Lord has to discipline us like he disciplined the Israelites. He wasn't punishing them. He wasn't sending these snakes to punish them, but discipline—the purpose of discipline is to make a disciple of, to bring them back closer to the Lord. We see that real clearly here because God spells it out for us.

But what about in our lives? How do we know when the Lord is disciplining us? When something bad happens, is it because we have committed some certain sin and now the Lord is disciplining us? Or is it because there is sin in the world in general and things are going to happen that are not a part of the perfect world God had created. You and I aren't always going to know that, are we? So whenever things are worrying us or troubling us, the answer for us is to turn back to the Lord. Whether it is because of some specific sin we have committed or not, anything that comes that worries us and troubles us can be for our eternal good when we look back to the Lord and say, "Lord, help me. I can't get through this on my own. Lord, I know I don't deserve your help because I have often turned my back on you. So often it seems, Lord, that I only run to you when I am in trouble. But I am in trouble now, Lord, and I need your help."

God is gracious. God is merciful. God hears our pleas and because we have faith in Christ, the faith he has given us, he hears and answers our prayers.

The lesson I think for us to learn isn't that those Israelites were terrible, but to recognize at times that we are terrible. And to recognize that our Lord's greatest desire is to always find a way to bring us back to him. So sometimes he may well allow difficulty into our lives so that we learn to rely more heavily on him and take our focus off our

troubles and put it on him. Take our focus off ourselves and our abilities and put it on him. I can do all things through God who gives me strength, is how Paul put it. The Israelites learned that lesson. But like us, they had to learn it over and over and over again. Sometimes we need to hear that message over and over and over again because it is a lesson at times that we might forget. As we see the difficulty in front of us, as we see the challenges to our faith, we might begin to wonder if God really loves us. That is when we need to go back to God's mercy.

God's mercy is not based on us. God's mercy is based on God. It is like we heard in our Second Lesson—*when we were dead in transgressions*, God made us alive by giving us his grace—his undeserved love sent Jesus to live in our place and die in our place. His undeserved love sent the Spirit into our hearts to lead us to believe that Jesus took away our sins of doubt and worry and anxiety and lack of trust in God. God took them away completely. God took them away perfectly. Faith believes this even when we can't see it. Faith believes that Jesus lived in our place and died in our place even though we weren't there to see it. We have seen it only through the eyes of faith. Faith believes it because the Holy Spirit works in our hearts.

The very nature of faith is to believe the unbelievable. Think of how unbelievable the answer was that God gave to their prayers. When they turned back to the Lord in prayer, the Lord said to make a snake and put it on a stick and tell everyone to look at it. If you go to a doctor tomorrow and they diagnose you with cancer and he says to look at his stethoscope and you will be healed, what are you going to think? If it happens, are you going to go home and tell people that you healed yourself by looking at a stethoscope? Or are you going to tell people about this doctor who has this miracle cure for your sickness?

Faith isn't even what we do. The power isn't in our looking. The power is in God's promise. God's promise said that if you look at that snake, you will live. That is what happened. When people were bitten, instead of looking down to find that snake and step on it, they were told to look up at that other snake and they would be healed. And God did it. Faith believed the unbelievable. Faith puts the trust in God because God is the one who has said it. I don't have to sit and weigh it and wonder logically if this makes any sense. If God has said it to me, the Spirit leads me to believe it. God is far above my ways and my thoughts and far above your ways and your thoughts. If God tells us that as we come to his altar we receive his very body and blood in, with and under the bread and wine—faith doesn't say "give me a wafer. I want to take it home and put it under an electron microscope and test it"—faith believes the promise. Faith believes it because that is what faith is. You and I don't have the ability to believe it on our own, but God, in his grace, gave us the Spirit so that we might believe that just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so Jesus was lifted up and gave his body and blood to take away all of our sins. The God who loved us that much, the God who has that kind of intense love for each and every one of us personally, individually—he knows us and loves us—the God who loves us that much is not going to abandon us when we are facing a difficult time in this world. It is for those times that he sent Christ. It is for those times he made his promises to us about the incomparable riches of his grace.

That doesn't fail. When we look to God, he will answer in his time and in his way, but in the best possible way. We might think that we know best, but God always knows best. God always acts for our best.

That is why we keep looking up. We are not just looking at the empty promise of a doctor and a stethoscope. We are looking at the fulfilled promise of our Savior and his cross.