

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B

“PATIENCE AMIDST THE SNAKES”

Numbers 21:4-9

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Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

4From 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. 5The 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.” 6Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7The 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. 8And 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.” 9So 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.



Anthony van Dyck – *Moses and the Brazen Serpent* [From Wikimedia Commons](#)

“God comes in the words, actions and helping hands of ordinary people, people whom you know all too well are flawed and imperfect.”

DIAGNOSIS: Deadly Impatience

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): *Impatience With Life*

All of us become impatient when things have not gone our way. Our child dawdles when we are trying to get to work or an appointment or even church on time. Our impatience erupts into angry words. Our child responds with tears. Then we realize that our impatience has gotten the best of us. We are ashamed.

A similar eruption of impatience takes place in today's First

Reading. In the midst of their forty-year journey in the wilderness, the children of Israel have become impatient with their life. They get angry, complain ... and suffer the consequences.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): *Impatience With God*

It was not an easy life out there in the desert. Living off their meager rations of manna and quail, wandering from one water hole to the next, the Israelites became impatient. However, it soon became clear that they were carping not only about the miserable and monotonous nature of their daily menu – they were carping about God and God’s chosen leader, Moses. Their impatience had become open rebellion against God.

We may not have to contend with the blazing sun and a monotonous diet, but we are right there with those Israelites complaining and griping about the miserable plight of our life. Could it be that our impatience like theirs isn’t only with long lines or slow drivers but, ... dare I say it, ... with God? That seems to be the frightening conclusion of this story. Our impatience with life is ultimately a reflection of our impatience with God.

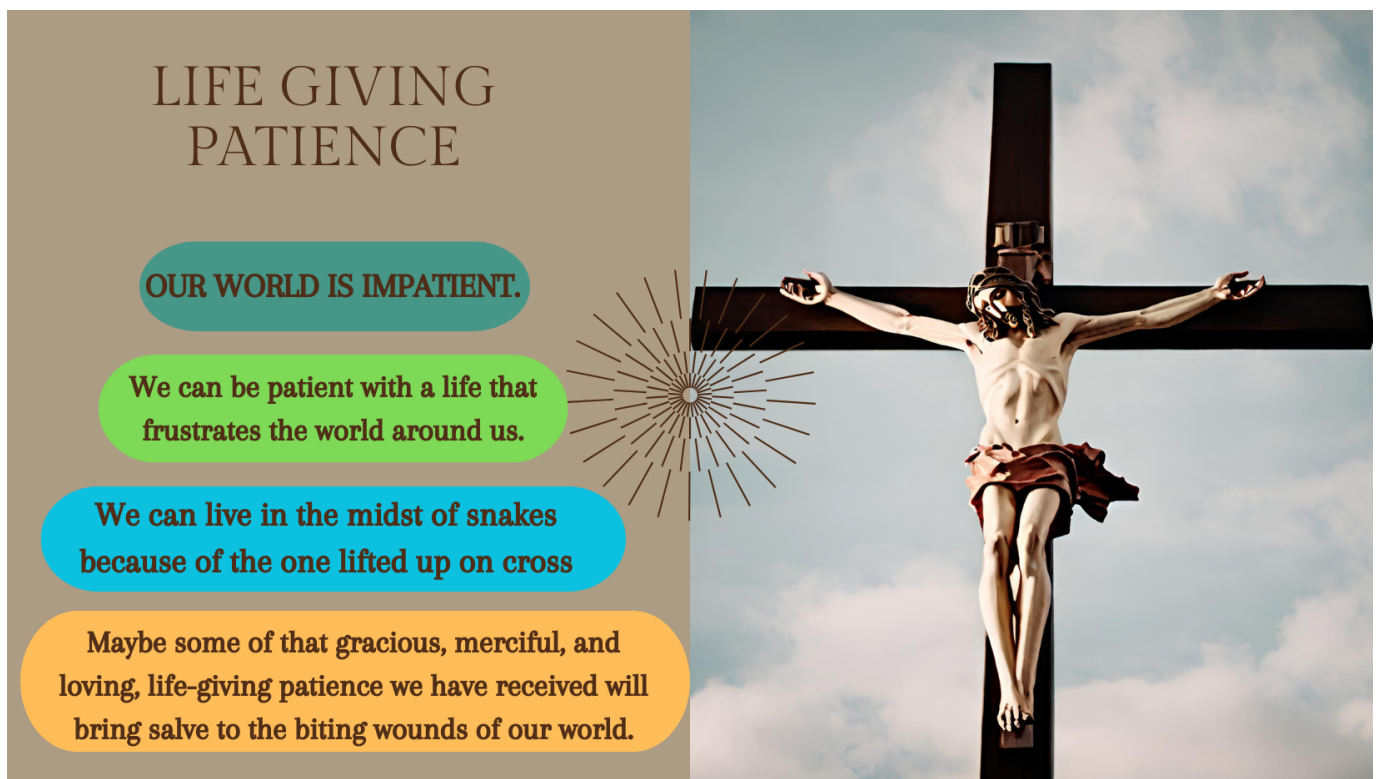
Ever since Adam and Eve stood in the Garden of Eden and looked at the forbidden fruit on the forbidden tree and thought how unfair it was of God to deny them the fruit that was so pleasing to their eyes, we humans have been impatient with life ... and with God.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): *God’s Deadly Impatience*

God does not take their insolence sitting down. God patience runs out and he sends an invasion of fiery serpents whose poisonous bites cause many to die.

God's harsh response to the griping of the Israelites is especially unnerving when you consider how often we exhibit the same kind of impatience in our lives.

So, God sends the "poisonous snakes" to stop us dead in our tracks, to confront us with the truth of the futility of thinking we can simply go our own way. God wants us to trust Him more than anything else in this world. When we don't, we are doomed.



From Canva

PROGNOSIS: Life Giving Patience

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): *God's Patience*

Then something amazing happens. God instructs Moses to make a bronze likeness of those fiery, poisonous snakes He had just sent into their midst and mount it on top of a pole. Then, when anyone is bitten by a snake, all he will need to do is look at

the bronze serpent on the pole and he will live.

Ironically, the bronzed image that saved them was molded in the very same image of what God had used to punish them. The sign of God's judgment becomes the sign of God's love for them. God decides to overcome his impatience with an even greater patience.

In today's Gospel Jesus compares Himself to that same bronzed serpent in the desert. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15). As the bronzed serpent became the means by which God saved snake-bitten Israel, so also does Christ lifted up on the cross become the means by which God saves us. Even God's impatience cannot thwart God's ever patient love for his people.

That is precisely what God does ... in that that serpent lifted up on a pole ... and Jesus lifted up on a cross. The cure for snakes is a snake. So also is the cross of Christ. The cure for death is another man's life. Death destroys death. As the Son of Man is lifted up on the cross, we see God's healing of a snake-bitten world.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): *Our Patience*

God comes to rescue us, His chosen people, from the poisonous snakes by what looks foolish, weak, trivial, and absurd. God comes in a bronze snake on a pole, in a crucified carpenter's son from the boondocks of Galilee, ... in the breaking of bread and pouring of wine, in the washing of water "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." God comes in the words, actions and helping hands of ordinary people, people whom you know all too well are flawed and imperfect.

God comes like that speaking the promise we long to hear: I love

you. Your life matters. You can count on me. Let go of your worries. Give me your suffering and pain. Let me have your disappointments. Give up all that stuff that is exhausting and killing you. Let me heal you with the peace the world can never understand and will never give to you. When we believe that promise, we HAVE the God of never-ending patience. We can at last trust the patience of God in the midst of the snakes and all the conflicting evidence.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): *Patience With Life*

Our world is impatient. But not you and I! We can wait. We can be patient with a life that frustrates the world around us. We can bear the suffering and pain. We can bear our crosses. We can live in the midst of snakes because of the one lifted up on cross who declares in those memorable words of today's Gospel, "For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Maybe some of that gracious, merciful, and loving, life-giving patience we have received will bring salve to the biting wounds of our world.