

**The Second Sunday After Pentecost
June 6, 2021
The Twelfth Commandment: “Thou Shalt Not Whine”
Based on Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-16
By Rev. Ruth Ragovin**



A monument of the bronze serpent (which Moses erected in the Neghev desert) on Mount Nebo, in front of the church of Saint Moses (2018)

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Numbers 21:4-9 (NIV) ~ *The Bronze Snake*

⁴ They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵ they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”

⁶ Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷ The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸ The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” ⁹ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

John 3:14-16 (NIV)

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Now the story of Moses holding up a bronze snake is one of the more bizarre stories in the Bible, isn't it? It conjures up images of the snake conversing with Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1ff), Moses' brother Aaron trying to convince Pharaoh of the power of God by throwing his staff down on the ground and it becoming a snake (Exodus 7:10), not to mention some Christians in present day Appalachia who take seriously the passage at the end of Mark's Gospel where it says that: ***“And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; ¹⁸ they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.”*** (Mark 16:17-18, NIV) Any of you like to try handling snakes or drinking poison?

Snakes (also translated as serpents) feature prominently in this episode in the wilderness journey of the Israelites. Under the amazing leadership of Moses, they have escaped from slavery under the Egyptians, miraculously crossing the Red Sea on their way to the Promised Land. Every time when things seemed bad, the Israelites became impatient and complained and God provided. In today's scripture we find ourselves about a year into the Exodus journey and the Israelites were again having a bad day. The Scripture says that ***“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”*** (Num 21:4-5). Indeed, the book of Numbers is full of bitching and moaning, complaining, griping, grumbling, grouching, whining, bellyaching.

What is different about today's complaining was that previously they were complaining about Moses. Today, though, they were complaining about both Moses and God. Richard Gribble reminds us that this is an important detail we sometimes overlook: ***“This passage is the last and most severe of the complaint stories that are recorded in the book of Numbers. Again the people are disgusted with the food and want more water, but their protests are of a higher order since now they complain to God as well as Moses. The people seem oblivious to all God has done for them their rescue from the Egyptians, escape through the Red Sea, provisions of water, quail, and manna, not to mention the physical sign of God's presence in the community at all times with the pillar of cloud by day and column of fire by night. The Israelites are apparently unable to look at their situation, to be thankful for what they have and what has been provided, and to trust that anything else needed will be provided by God.”*** (“Look Inside and Discover Life,” in www.sermons.com)

How do you feel when you are around people who complain? I don't know about you but it really can dampen my spirits and leave me feeling depressed, if not upset. I can feel good about things but then someone will come to me and complain about a spelling mistake on the bulletin or the way that I mispronounced a name. I can spend months planning a mission trip and putting all the details in place only to have someone whine about the food in a restaurant. Such a downer, especially if you receive such a complaint or hear people whining when you have put a lot of time and effort into something and already are tired! Hmm. Perhaps I am complaining myself right now about how I feel when people complain!

We all have experienced how just one complaining, whining person can suck the joy out of a gathering of people. You know them, right? Those for whom the glass is never half full but half empty. Two people can have exactly the same experience but one will complain about something and the other will see a blessing in it. Like the proverb that says *“Instead of complaining that the rosebush is full of thorns, be happy that the torn bush has roses.”* The irony often is that it is the people who have it hardest in life will see the blessings, while those who have it easy are the ones to complain. My friend and mentor Joan Borysenko gives this example:

“One of the most common complaints that men have about women is that we complain too much. Some men are pretty good at it, too. But no matter what your gender is, complaining can compromise people’s inner peace as well as your own.

I once appeared on Oprah as the so-called expert on how people cope with life-threatening illness. It was a pleasure to be upstaged by a man with a debilitating neurological disease called ALS, or Lou Gehrig’s disease. Confined to a wheelchair, he’d lost almost all function. Since he could no longer breathe on his own, a respirator breathed for him. Unable to eat, he was fed through a tube. Unable to speak, he could just barely move his lips. No problem. His wife and nurse lip-read. With their help, unbelievably enough, he had become a motivational speaker.

The man was a stunning, if somewhat daunting, inspiration. Compared to his dire circumstances, my usual complaints about busyness, fat thighs, and rude drivers paled to narcissistic insignificance. He had every right to be depressed and angry, and I’m sure he had his moments. But according to his loved ones, he was really and truly a teacher of peace. When Oprah asked how he kept his spirits up, he replied that we all have the same choice. We can have a pity party or a peaceful heart. He made a practice of choosing peace.” (*Inner Peace for Busy People*, 109)

The Israelites could have a pity party or choose to cultivate a peaceful heart. Yet instead of remembering how God had provided for them, they chose a pity party, forming a “Back to Egypt Committee.” Instead of being grateful that they hadn’t starved to death they whined about the menu. Manna yesterday, manna today, and manna tomorrow. They didn’t even need to lift a finger to cook it! God rained it down from heaven for them. All they had to do was gather it up. Instead of being patient and waiting for God to come through for them as God had in the past when they were hungry and thirsty they started in again on their pattern of behavior: impatience and complaining and whining. It indicated a complete lack of trust in the faithfulness and goodness of the God, who had been with them every step of the way.

One complaining person is bad enough. Indeed, in Proverbs it says that wives who complain are like “*a continual dripping on a rainy day*” (Prov. 27:15). The Bible, of course, was written by men complaining about their wives but complaining husbands should be put in that category too. Now think of putting hundreds of complaining people together, all like dripping faucets. Poor Moses! My blood pressure literally rises just thinking about this. Have you noticed how people feed on each other’s complaining? Complainers actively seek out other complainers to attend their pity party. Misery, after all, loves company. They complain about all the things that are exhausting them, all the people who need their help, how unappreciated they feel, and all the things they would rather be doing. Each tries to outdo the others with their list by saying, “You think you’re busy?” These pity parties actually become competitive sports. Even though this mutual complaining or “venting” might make people feel better for a little while it actually is what psychologists call a form of ‘regressive coping’. Joan Borysenko says that “*when you’re in the process of whining, you’re moving backward in time, acting like a helpless child rather than a self-actualizing adult. The other whiner is supporting you in your regression, rather than challenging you to achieve self-awareness and growth.*” (Joan Borysenko, “*Inner Peace for Busy People,*” pp. 110-111.)

Moses must have been so fed up with this group of complainers who were engaged in a pity party of regressive coping. But he got on his knees and prayed. Perhaps he said something like, “Lord, I have had it up to here with these people you have asked me to lead. They are beyond getting on my nerves. I feel like I’m about to have a nervous breakdown. Please, please, please send some food and water! And, as an extra favor, since the people are complaining that the menu is getting a little repetitious with manna for breakfast, manna for lunch, and manna dinner with occasional quail thrown in, could we not have a hamburger, fries, and coke?”

But God did not do what God normally had done, like having Moses strike a rock which miraculously gushed forth water. God decided that this was a good teaching moment. Instead of food and water, God sent poisonous snakes to those who had complained. Our scripture says: ***“Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died”*** (Num 21:6). Wow! Snakes! I would have been terrified, seeing people dying around me! This is an absolutely horrible story! Beyond PG-13. It should be R-rated.

Should complaining be dealt with by God in this way? Isn't this a little extreme? I think we might understand this story metaphorically rather than literally. It would seem that the point of the story is that a complaining spirit is a sinful spirit. Why? Perhaps because it can be so deadly and divisive in community. Negativity is contagious. Negative, whining, complaining people can shift the energy of an entire group of people and even bring a project to a grinding halt as people begin to lose heart. The flip side is that positive people can prompt forward movement. As Catherine Pulsifer says, *“Now, 10 years later, the person who talked and complained is still talking and complaining and still remains in the same position. The person who took the initiative and found solutions has been promoted several times”* (“How Valuable Are You?”).

The subtext of this story is that the devil thrives in an atmosphere of complaining because it prevents forward movement and positive change and growth. If the Israelites didn't stop complaining they would remain stagnant and stuck. Their whining and complaining could destroy unity and even prevent the Israelites from being able to reach the promised land. They would stay there on the border of Canaan looking out at the land flowing with milk and honey from a distance, as they continued to whine and bellyache, grumble and grouse. Thus God sent snakes to stop their complaining and whining and to teach them humility and patience, which would allow them to continue on toward their destination. And this teaching tool of the poisonous snakes worked in a hurry. The people rushed to Moses and said, ***“We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us”*** (Num 21:7). So Moses prayed for the people.

And this is what God told Moses to do: he was to make a bronze snake (remember this is the Bronze Age!) and put it on a pole so that when the people looked up at it their potentially fatal snakebites would be healed (Num 21:8). Snake bites being healed by looking at a snake? The cure for the snakes was a snake?

We know that the venom of poisonous snakes can be used to treat snakebite victims. The venom is thus both poisonous and healing. In the ancient world snakes were powerful symbols of both life and death, depending on the context. In this case, snakes could mean either death if the Israelites chose to look downward and continue in their activity of complaining, or it could mean life if they looked up at the snake God had instructed Moses to make as an antidote. My guess is that the poisonous snakes that God sent to break up the Israelites' pity party were an instant wake up call to turn from complaining and whining to patience, gratitude, and action. They looked up at the snake on the pole, which now represented life. And this involved giving up complaining and whining and instead trusting in God's providence in our lives.

Many people have made suggestions on how to overcome complaining or whining. An effective one was when an elder in Sparta named Joe Wallace told my then 3-yr-old daughter Rachel who was busy whining about wanting some candy in church that if she didn't stop he would cut out her "whiner." That stopped her in a hurry! I know my mother told me that I was quite a whiner as a child too. I've heard that there is a "Wipe out the Whining Program" you can download on www.terrificparenting.com Another suggestion was made by the Rev. Will Bowen at Christ Church Unity in Nashua who "challenged worshippers to quit complaining as a way to bring more prosperity into their lives." He handed out 250 silicone purple bracelets that he wanted his congregants to use for 21 days to remind themselves to stop complaining. He next appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show and, after that appearance, had orders for more than 4 million bracelets. Then there is the comedian Loretta LaRoche who suggests that when you want to whine, you might find a friend and do it right. Each of you gets two minutes to complain to your heart's content without interruption. Hopefully, you'll get everything off your chest, creating a parody of the pity party without taking it seriously. If you are by yourself and you need to let off steam, put your hands on your hips while standing in front of a mirror, and power whine for two minutes. (Joan Borysenko, *Inner Peace for Busy People*, 110-111)

So you can cut out your or your child's, spouses, friend's, or co-worker's whiner, you can embark upon a web-based "Wipe out Whining Program," you can wear a purple silicone bracelet, or you can power whine with a friend or alone with your hand on your hip in front of a mirror. But there is an even better suggestion in scripture, and it comes from a New Testament passage about snakes, which refers directly back to our Old Testament passage of today. It is from the Gospel of John 3:14-16 and it goes like this:

“And just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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 3:14-16)

The Israelites complained and sinned. God told them to look at the snake Moses was holding up so that so that they might not perish but have life. We complain and whine and sin and are told to set our eyes on Jesus on the cross so that we might not perish but have eternal life.

This week every time you catch yourself complaining or whining, indulging in regressive coping or becoming like a dripping faucet, look at the cross. As you begin this new week, my challenge to you is that you learn the lesson taught us by the snake: “Thou Shalt Not Whine.” Instead of whining and complaining, look at the Cross, remembering that ***“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).

Let us pray: Lord, let us open our eyes having faith and trust in you, seeing the cup half full, as we rejoice in the many blessings that you shower down upon us with each new breath we take! Let us keep our eyes on Jesus, whom you lifted up, knowing that he came not only to give us life but also so that we might have it more abundantly. Amen.