

## **Muttering and Sputtering** **John 3:14 and Numbers 21:4-9**

*(preached March 10, 2024)*

Numbers 21 and John 3 were both part of the lectionary. As you can see by the readings they are very connected and I want to look at Numbers in a few different ways. It might be 1 of the scriptures/stories that we don't know much about.

My commentary by J Vernon McGee states that this is the 8th murmuring by the Israelites. This is done in large bold print. I went through his whole commentary to see what he thought the other 7 were, and nothing. So, the following is a list of what I think are murmurings.

Detour At the same time that I am prepping for this sermon, in the Bible Study on Psalms, we had a chapter on complaining. The gist of that was that it is ok to complain to God. In the Psalms that we studied, the writer started out complaining to God, but at the end was praising God for what He would do for the writer and for Israel. That got us (me ) thinking about complaining, muttering, murmuring, ranting. We all think of these as synonyms for complaining, but they aren't. The best way to explain the difference is the way that Josie explained it" Muttering/murmuring is talking behind God's back" Thank you Josie. And as God is ever present it is kind of silly to do, in my opinion.

First let's start in Exodus. The Israelites were in slavery for 430 years. They complained to God because they thought that He had forgotten them. This was a complaint, and justifiable. They thought they were forgotten. We go through things and often think that God has forgotten us. We have been in Search mode for 3 years, though it may seem longer. God has not forgotten us, and we definitely are not in slavery, and it has not been 430 years, though it may feel like it!! We need to trust God. In the right time He will match us with the right person, but this is not the point of this homily.

Anyway, The Israelites become free, and they are leaving Egypt, with the Egyptian army hot on their heels!! " Moses, you brought us out of Egypt to be killed in the desert." They safely cross the Red Sea, the Egyptian army is drowned, and they move on.

They plod on through the desert and soon are muttering that they lack food and water. " Moses, you brought us out of Egypt to die in the desert. Egypt wasn't so bad." These are the same people that safely crossed the Red Sea, and saw Egypt be destroyed. Moses strikes a stone and gets water. God sends down Manna and quail for them to eat. This first murmur is in Exodus 15. They continue to mutter in Exodus 17. We then have the issue with the Golden calf and more murmurings because Moses is on the Mountain getting the 10 commandments, and they think that he is lost. But every mutter, or sputtering was" You brought us out here to kill us." They continually saw miracles and it did not strengthen their faith. They still sputtered. They also forgot the promise that God was going to give them the Promised Land. Remember when I said that in Psalms, the writer complained then praised God, there is very little mention of the Isrealites praising God for what He did and continually did for them. I am actually amazed that God still hung in there with this group of people. At the same time it encourages me that God won't give up on me, no matter how I mess up, He will still love me. That is something to be joyful about.

We are not like the Israelites, or are we? They saw miracles to get out of Egypt, they are following a pillar of fire, God has answered their cries, their needs and they still doubt. How often has God answered our prayer, yet we have another problem and we panic before we pray and say “thank you God, we know that you will handle this.” In our study of Psalms we discussed complaints. It is okay to complain to God, but be realistic. If you are hungry, that is real. If you are given tuna fish but it is not albacore white, that is not a realistic complaint. Now a slight detour for another point.

The beginning of this passage has them going around Edom. Edom would not give them a right of way to pass through their land. They had to go north through difficult terrain, the people got impatient and started murmuring again. They had Manna. They had to get up every morning to gather it, and it was good food. They referred to it as “good for nothing bread” in Num 11: 4 - 6. Manna was truly a miracle food as it gave them all the vitamins and nutrients that they would need for the long walk. In Ps 78:25 it is called “angel’s food”. It was good for them but they were sick of it!

Can you hear them,” this manna only comes in 1 flavor, you would think that God could alternate and give us chocolate, strawberry, vanilla and peppermint!” I can hear them sputtering, can you? Now follow me with some similarities.

Manna was the Bread of Life for the Israelites. Who is our Bread of Life? We say it every time we have Communion. Receive the Bread of Life. Manna was given to Israel to sustain their life, Jesus is given to the world to give life. Just as Israel had to gather their manna daily, we should partake of the Word of God, our Bread of Heaven daily.

This time when the Israelites were griping, I think that God had had it. Without warning He sent them snakes. The snakes were fiery, their venom caused burning, inflammation and pain. It was not a pleasant death. Now the Israelites have learned something, in vs 7 they admitted that “we have sinned.” They beg Moses to intercede for them, which he did. We do not need anyone to intercede for us with God, we can go directly to Him with our concerns, our confessions, and our praise.

This brings us to the crucifixion. In John it says “As the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, so the Son of Man will be lifted up.” God had them create a serpent on a stake, that if they looked at, they would live. The serpent on the stake saved them from a physical death. God knew at that time that Jesus would come and be crucified “lifted up”. This was before the Romans had invented crucifixion! God knows what will happen to us. We just need to look to Jesus. The other thing about the stake, each person had to look for themselves to survive. It was personal.

Take aways. Talk to God, tell Him what you are feeling, but don’t constantly gripe, mutter and sputter against Him. That is what brought the snakes, murmuring against God. Take time to say thank you, to praise Him for His love and goodness. There is a song that says I can’t count the blessings of God to me. Let’s be like that. Remember how He saved You in the past, and will save you in the future. As God knew that Jesus would be lifted up on the cross, He lifted up the serpent. God knows what is going to happen before we do. Trust Him. Amen.