

Sunday, March 11, 2018 – Fourth Sunday in Lent
“Leaving Downcast Behind”

Numbers 21: 4-9

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Process Structure

Adapted from CSL Series “Leave It Behind”

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Lent is a somber time, but let’s face the truth. Christ is risen; our Savior is alive. We are journeying toward eternity with Him. “God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance” (Romans 2:4). Yes, we repent. Yes, we must be sincere, for God searches our hearts. “You shall be holy;” not just do external holy things. That said, Lenten repentance is not merely about groveling about your unworthiness. Repentance is rightly done with confidence that God forgives those who look up to Him.

“Look up to Him.” “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14). Jesus is referring to the story of the Bronze Serpent in Numbers 21. You heard it before, it’s during the 40 years of wandering the wilderness between the escape from Egypt and taking over the Promised Land – a crowd of people the size of the population of Las Vegas living in the desert with no running water or electricity and living in tents, exposed to all the wilderness that desert life can throw at you. We have a lot of creature comforts but the sun still beats down and scorpions still find their way inside and sting and the wind still blows. The people of Israel were in a complaining mood over all of this and the Lord seems to have had enough of it. “Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died” (Numbers 21:6). Can you imagine? The people looked down and saw snakes swarming all over the camp. Ugh. Poisonous snakes. Shudder. No Easter confidence; only downcast faces.

How many times are you and I downcast because of sin? Actually, every time we are downcast is due to sin, whether something you’ve caused or something that happened to you because of sin “out there.” Let’s say you have some problem that’s getting you down, sometimes to the point of despair. It may be that you didn’t cause that problem; so I’m not saying every time you’re downcast it’s your own fault. But let’s think about what the Bible teaches us about sin. When Adam and Eve sinned, sin came into the whole world. One bad

apple spoiled the whole bushel. Or as the Bible says, “One trespass led to condemnation for all men” (Romans 5:18). So humanity is fallen; creation is defiled, and we live in a broken, sinful world. You may not have directly caused whatever it is that is making you downcast, but our sinful humanity has brought it all upon all of us.

Back to Jesus. Jesus reminds us that when Moses raised up the Bronze Serpent, everyone who looked up, got it? Everyone who was downcast looked up to the pole and was saved from death. Jesus says that action pointed ahead to Himself. He would be raised up on the cross so that “whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). We can only imagine how the Israelites, snakebit with poison burning and stiffening their limbs looked up to the Bronze Serpent. With just as much earnestness, with just as much desperation for eternal life, we lift up our eyes to Jesus. “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (Jesus) said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die” (John 12:32–33).

That’s why Paul says in today’s epistle, “By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8). Your own works? Ultimately they’ll make you downcast if you’re looking to them as your answer to the snakebite of sin. Don’t let the snakes bite you. Jesus on the cross? Grace. Look up with the hope of life.

Your life this week will be between the two, between downcast and looking up in hope. That’s just the way it is. We hear great uplifting things on Sunday but things get us down during the week. There are so many occasions and causes – grief. Depression. Fears and anxieties about our health, about our finances, about our marriages, about our relationships, about our children, about our future. These are not small or trivial things. This Lent we’re focusing on God’s calling us to our true home in heaven. When you go on a trip, you can’t take everything with you. The takeaway from today’s sermon and worship is leave downcast behind. Look up in hope to Jesus.

But hear this well, because leaving downcast behind is oh so easily misunderstood. Leaving downcast behind doesn’t mean keeping a stiff upper lip or putting on a show that everything is great... by the way, those false fronts are what we’ll be “leaving behind” next

week. We don't deny that we're downcast or shame ourselves for our downcast spirit or simply will ourselves from somewhere deep down inside to be different. Instead, we're honest about our feelings as we walk through the valleys. Nor is leaving downcast behind a question of snapping our fingers and watching our mood and our feelings change and our problems disappear. Sin is still here. Snakes still bite. Life is real hard, and sadnesses will come. Many a Christian have been driven even further into downcast as they beat themselves up for the pain they go through as if they were superhuman, or as they stop forgiving themselves for the sins God has already forgiven. No – leaving downcast behind means being real about the pain, whether it is caused by our own sin or is a product of sin leveled against us in the world, even as we earnestly, desperately, lift up our eyes to Jesus with hope for life. Leaving downcast behind is about fixating on Jesus, high and lifted up, instead of fixating on the inevitable snakebites.

A now deceased pastor, Dr. Mennicke, shared the story about his grandson, “Our 3-year-old grandson was standing at the basement stairs, trying to muster enough courage to make the descent. Before taking the first step, he said, “Oh Jesus, it’s awful dark down there. You’d better hold my hand.” (Devotions for the Chronologically Gifted, p. 58) When something this week has you downcast, look up. Ask Jesus to hold your hand.

The great American poet John Greenleaf Whittier put it this way:

A tender child of summers three
Seeking her little bed at night,
Paused on the dark stair timidly.
“O Mother, take my hand,” said she,
“And then the dark will all be light.”

We older children ***[Gesture; point to the crowd so that they clearly understand that we are***

the “older children.”] grope our way
From dark behind to dark before;
And only when our hands we lay
Dear Lord, in Thine, the night is day.
Reach downward to the sunless days

Wherein our guides are blind as we,
And faith is small, and hope delays;
Take Thou the hands of prayer we raise,
And let us feel the light of Thee.

Leave downcast behind! "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God" (Psalm 42:11).

Amen.