

Sermon – John 3:13-17; Numbers 21:4b-9; 1 Corinthians 1:18-24
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“Make It Make Sense”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. One of my favorite little corners of the internet could be described as, “Things That Made My Toddler Cry This Week.” Not that anyone would make a toddler cry on purpose, of course; it’s just that there’s no telling what will cause a little one to lose it. Parents report toddlers crying because the bath is too wet. Or because no, you can’t have syrup – and only syrup – for breakfast. Or because the toddler in question wants to have a tail but doesn’t. Or because he wants shoes just like his best friend, Jacob, even though there is no Jacob. I think my favorite, a bit dated obviously, is the toddler who took their sandwich and shoved it into the VCR and then cried because it didn’t play a movie about sandwiches. Which is understandable; who wouldn’t want to see that movie? Truth be told, I miss those days. These days, my kids complain with finely-tuned logic. I’m surprised there aren’t bullet-pointed PowerPoints. But little ones are different. There’s not much to do when a toddler, having asked for a cheeseburger with no cheese, complains when you give them a hamburger, but at least it’s kind of adorable.
2. Irrational complaints are nothing new. Neither are they confined to toddlers. We’re just as bad, but not nearly as cute. Witness the people of God as they make their way from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. Disappointed that God – yes, the same God who broke their chains and made a way through the Red Sea – keeps giving them manna and quail for which they don’t need

to work, they grumble against God and Moses. There's no food and no water, they complain, and "we detest this miserable food." Well, which is it? Is there no food, or is the food detestable? It's a good thing they didn't have a VCR. Unfortunately, they soon have something worth complaining about. In response to their ingratitude and sin, poisonous snakes are sent into their ranks. And while the serpents seem like a punishment, the point of the story is less about why there are snakes and more about, well, snakes! Less about God sending the serpents, more about what God does in response.

3. We may not be more reasonable than toddlers, but we do have real things to complain about. There are snakes all around our feet. We live in a world of violence, of hate-filled rhetoric and hate-fueled killing. The killing of Charlie Kirk this week reminds us of this, as did the murder of Minnesota Representative Melissa Hortman and her husband, Mark, a few months ago. Not to mention yet another school shooting this week. Or an ICE action not far from here that ended in death. And on and on and on. When will the cycle stop? When will the serpents cease? Why, God, does this continue; where, God, does this end?
4. It ends at the foot of the cross. The people ask Moses to pray to God to take away the snakes. But God does a curious thing instead. God tells Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and place it upon a pole. When they people are bit, they can look up to the bronze serpent and be saved. God doesn't stop the snakes; instead, God comes into their midst and saves them. In his nighttime conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus leans into this story to describe the new future God is opening up. Jesus doesn't take us out of the sin and suffering we have unleashed upon the world. Instead, Jesus joins us here. Gives himself up to this world's violence. Let's this world have its way with him. Is lifted up on the cross, the sign of suffering and shame, and becomes this world's salvation. Why? For God so loved the world. Loved, and loves it still.

5. On this Feast of the Holy Cross, we are called to look up. To turn our eyes away from what is killing us and toward our salvation. To look upon Jesus. The cross is God's definitive word against the violence, the hate, the bigotry of this world. Jesus ends up on the cross not because God embraces violence. Jesus doesn't die to satisfy an angry God who can't find another way to forgive us. Jesus dies because he, God in this world, God in the flesh, identifies and stands with those in this world who are hated, marginalized, persecuted. Jesus upon the cross is just the latest in a long line of losers killed by power to keep the so-called peace. Except for one thing. Jesus doesn't stay dead. The resurrection is God's "no" to our "no." In raising up the paschal victim, God declares that it must end. In the risen Christ, death is dead. Life is the final word. Life that welcomes all, forgives all, encompasses all in the grace of God that will not be thwarted. Not by snakes that bite nor by serpents that seduce us to toward hate or bigotry or violence. Look up, friends, and see your salvation. Look up, and see this Jesus who died for us. Look up, and see that there is another way.

6. There is another way; a way of life. Yesterday, I did my favorite thing to do as a pastor. I showed up, and saw God doing incredible, life-giving things through you. I came to Grace to pray with a GriefShare gathering for those whose spouses had died. In the midst of difficult loss, God was drawing people together to find hope for the journey, strength to face another day. And then I went to an open house for Housing Forward's new emergency shelter in Oak Park, named in honor of our own Pat Anderson, a place where life and hope are embodied; where those in need are not further victimized but can instead find a way forward. This is cross-shaped, cruciform living. And in a bit, I'll join you in a picnic, a feast of fellowship in the midst of this world's worries, a feast of joy that reminds us that sorrow doesn't get the last word. And in between it all, we see Jesus, the One who was crucified and yet lives, give himself to us once more in the meal around this table. The meal in which violence and death are defeated, the meal at which all are welcome,

but hate must be left at the door. There is no room for it here, here where there is only love.

7. Like the people long ago, we wish that the snakes would just go away. And one day they will. But today we see that God has joined us where we are. That Jesus has been lifted up on this most holy cross for the sake of the whole world. That we may look upon him and live. It seems foolish to us, perhaps, that God would do such a thing. But what is our wisdom compared to the Lord's? This world would have you give into hatred and assume that violence is the answer. But God says otherwise. God says no. In the cross, violence is shown to be an empty shell. As empty as the tomb itself. Christ is alive. Love has won the victory. Look up; away from the serpents, away from complaint. Look up and live. Alive, live for others. For God so loved the world. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.