

**SATURDAY, MARCH 5: DEUTERONOMY 8:1-20**

**OCULI**

# **THE LUTHERAN HERALD**

In the Promised Land, there shall be no lack...but in the wilderness wandering, lack shall be in abundance! But, why? Why does God have His people suffer want and deprivation? Only so that when they are fed they may know and remember that He is the One Who feeds them. Without such suffering, how shall one who still has the desires of fallen flesh ever learn that hedonism is not the answer?

Luther teaches us to look for God's hand in such suffering. While we rightly remember that the devil is ever on the attack and that the consequences of sin are always weighing upon us, in all that is brought against us to lead us to despair in our anguish, we must learn to look as Joseph did upon what his brothers had done to him those many years earlier: "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Gen. 50:20). Certainly, the devil does not mean to work for us good, but evil; yet, since what Satan was before his fall was the good creature of God, in everything he does, he must end up serving his Creator: all that he does intending evil has lying behind it God's continuous intent for our good.

In every trial, this is a great comfort: what the devil, world, and flesh intend to separate us from God, our Lord uses to drive us ever deeper into His arms; the very thing with which they would rob us of faith makes us cry out to Him and brings us once again to hear His Word, to receive His body and blood!

Grant us, O Lord, in every time of trouble to hear Your promise, that we may call upon You and glorify You as You deliver us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

**QUINQUAGESIMA—OCULI  
(FEBRUARY 8—MARCH 5, 2016)**

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# Lesson from the Book of Concord Quinquagesima Sunday

## Chapter II, Article IV.

[B. What is Justifying Faith?]

The adversaries [Roman Catholics] feign that faith is only a knowledge of history, and, therefore, [they] teach that it can coexist with mortal sin. Hence, they say nothing concerning faith, by which Paul so frequently says that men are justified, because those who are accounted righteous before God do not live in mortal sin. But that faith which justifies, is not merely a knowledge of history, but it is to assent to the promise of God, in which, for Christ's sake, the remission of sins and justification are freely offered. [It is certainty or the certain trust in the heart, when, with my whole heart, I regard the promises of God as certain and true, through which there are offered me, without my merit, the forgiveness of sins, grace and all salvation, through Christ the Mediator.] And, that no one may suppose that it is mere knowledge, we will add further: it is to wish and to receive the offered promise of the remission of sins and of justification. And the distinction between this faith and the righteousness of the Law, can be easily discerned. Faith is the divine service, which receives the benefits offered by God; the righteousness of the Law is the divine service which offers to God our merits. By faith, God wishes Himself so to be honored, that we may receive from Him those things which He promises and offers.

But that faith signifies, not only a knowledge of history, but the faith which assents to the promise, Paul openly testifies, when he says (Rom. 4:16): "Therefore it is of faith, to the end the promise might be sure." For he judges, that the promise cannot be received, unless by faith. Wherefore, he compares them correlatively, and connects promise and faith. Although it will be easy to decide what faith is, if we consider the Creed, where this article certainly stands: "The forgiveness of sins." Therefore, it is not enough to believe that Christ was born, suffered, was raised again, unless we add also this article, which is the final cause of the history: "The forgiveness of sins." To this article, the rest must be referred, viz. that, for Christ's sake, and not for the sake of our merits, forgiveness of sins is given us. For what need would there be, that Christ be given for our sins, if for our sins our merits can give satisfaction?

—Apology of the Augsburg Confession, §48–52

FRIDAY, MARCH 4: DEUTERONOMY 5:1-33

OCULI

Deuteronomy gets its name from the translation of the Old Testament into Greek, where it stood for a Hebrew phrase meaning not "second law," but "copy of the law." (Deut. 17:18). Thus, it is not a replacement of the Law as previously given, but a restating and application of that Law. For this reason, some of the wording of the Decalogue will be a little different, but still perfectly in keeping with what was already inscribed upon the tablets of stone already in the Ark of the Covenant. While Moses speaks by the Holy Spirit's inspiration, this also teaches us how to regard preaching today, as embodied in Luther's explanation of the Third Commandment, that we are to hold sacred the preaching of the Word along with the Word itself. Preaching is to put God's Word on display, to make its clarity apparent amid the sin and mixed messages in the world around us (and even in our own flesh). So also hymnody: hymns don't have to be confined to adding tunes to the Psalms, nor even of Psalm paraphrases, but every hymn we use must, in all its parts, not only agree with the Word of God, but proclaim it, helping its clear message be seen and become attached to our hearts.

In this way, the exclamation of Yahweh—"Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!"—has life for us. Understanding that God's voice is "too much" for us brings us to our knees in repentance, that has us beg to hear His forgiving Word once more. When we give heed to preaching and to Holy Absolution, God rejoices to have given us such hearing.

Give to us, O Triune God, a heart that ever hears, that we may penitently rejoice in the restoration granted us in Your Absolution. Amen.

“That the congregation of the Lord not be like sheep which have no shepherd,” the Lord must Himself “set a man over the congregation.” Such always has been and always will be the case as long as this world endures. As St. Paul says, those who are the proper earthly shepherds of God’s flock are those whom “the Holy Spirit has made...overseers” (Acts 20:28) God gives Moses the man who is ordained to stand in his place and gives some of Moses’ authority to him. That is, Joshua would not be “the Prophet” Who was to fulfill what Moses had promised and commanded, but would continue to give voice to what had already been revealed and to conduct himself and rule the people in accordance with it.

Such is the case with our pastors today, as well. No new revelation is to come from them, but through them the Word of God is to rule over all. It is important that, as much as Man can tell, a pastor is one in whom the Spirit dwells; thus, candidates for the Holy Office are examined as to the doctrine they confess and are not known to be living in open impenitence. While they continue to serve as pastors, they are regularly visited by the bishop, so that the whole fellowship can be assured that they continue to confess the same and are not known to be living an immoral life.

Those who are to feed the flock God, which He purchased with His own blood, are to be His and remain His and to be treated as His. Where this is done, God is glorified and His Kingdom continues to come.

May we truly hold preaching and Your Word sacred and gladly hear and learn it, O Lord, that the grace and blessing You give us may be evident to others; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

“Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, ‘All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient.’ And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words.’” (Ex. 24:7-8a)

The Children of Israel had just been saved. God had delivered them from slavery by causing them to pass through the waters of the Red Sea; He had entrusted them with the Ten Commandments; and now, He marks them with the Book of the Covenant, and the Blood of the Covenant. This passage, by the way, drives rabbinical scholars nuts! Israelites are to have no contact with blood. And yet here the Lord is, sprinkling blood on His people.

How similarly He saves us! We were enslaved to sin, death, and the devil. God delivers us by causing us to pass through the waters of Holy Baptism. He gives us His Word, and the “take, drink, this is my blood of the new Testament (or Covenant).” And even more intimately in contact with the saving blood of Christ, we are marked as the redeemed of the Lord.

Dear ones in Christ, be obedient...“listen up”...to God’s Word. It shows you your sin by way of the Ten Commandments. But listen up to the word of Gospel too...your sins are all forgiven you, and you are marked as the Lord’s, by way of Word, and water, and blood. Amen.

“Lord Jesus Christ, I thank you for your very Great salvation. Grant me so to treasure it this day, that I live out my redemption to Your praise and honor and glory. Amen.”

“And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!’ So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord.’” (Ex.32:4-5)

Well, that did not take long! Yesterday, we read about God speaking His words of sacred trust to those He had redeemed, and marking them with the blood of the covenant. By today, Moses is gone too long on the mountain, and the Israelites lose patience, and they demand of Aaron that he forge for them a golden calf.

Note their words. “This is your god, that brought you out of Egypt.” Aaron even calls for a feast “to the Lord” as represented by this golden calf. They weren’t coming clean and forsaking the faith. Instead, they were taking elements of revealed religion, and mixing it with other stuff that seemed more acceptable to their sensibilities.

And so today: we are tempted to water down the faith and mix in our own personal stuff too. Lord have mercy! The saving faith does not need our help, our amendments, our additions or modifications. God grant us rather to keep it pure and undefiled, that trusting in Christ Jesus alone, we may have something reliable and certain on which to base our hope of salvation.

“Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word! Preserve us from any temptation to add to, subtract from, or ignore any part of it. Grant us rather to believe it, and steadfastly to cling to it. Amen.”

The end of the 23rd chapter makes it clear: Balak is not learning anything from the repeated prophecies delivered by Balaam. The Twenty-fourth chapter makes it clear that Balaam, though, is. He falls down, with eyes wide open, he says, because now he sees. Yahweh isn’t one god among many that he might call upon, isn’t a deity mainly concerned with the here and now, as if there would be nothing else. Instead, this is the One, True God, the One Who brings an everlasting paradise, Who plants His people so that they live on like trees past the lifetimes of men, trees for whom water abounds. They, in turn, give birth to many more that are also the planting of the Lord, steadfast unto eternity. As this nation has been brought out of Egypt, destroying Pharaoh’s chariots and horsemen, so shall its future enemies fall—not by their strength, but by their Gods strength alone.

Balak says that God has kept Balaam from prospering and we know that he is right and wrong: Balaam has not prospered in terms of the worldly things that Balak understands, but he has prospered in a better way, as Jesus would later present: “what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” Matt. 16:26). Balaam has gained his soul, the greatest gift and prosperity of God, the blessedness that lasts forever, granted through faith in Christ.

Almighty God, grant that our pastors neither be swayed by our displeasure nor their own, but be so bound to the Lutheran Confessions that they proclaim Your whole counsel purely and that we may reckon it so; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Balaam acts symbolically—building seven altars—so that Balak may see that the Word Balaam brings back to him is the totality of the answer God would give, the full judgment Yahweh would make in this case. While he still vacillates between being a prophet and a sorcerer, the Lord is speaking clearly to Him and he fears Him above fearing the king.

Balak's response to the first prophecy is classic: "Can we look at this a different way, so that you'll see a way to bless me?" It's as if the angle from which Balaam viewed Israel made things unclear for God! "Oh, they can't be as numerous as you say! Don't be afraid, we'll go look at them where you only will see a few of them, and then you can proclaim my victory over them!"

Yet, Balaam's first prophecy, that saw Israel as a nation set apart from all others, is confirmed in the second, and explained, as well! The Lord—Yahweh—is Himself their king! How, then, would He curse and not bless? Even though he would love to have all that Balak was promising him, Balaam's would-be-treacherous tongue is overwhelmed by the Lord. And consider what He says: What the Lord has blessed, man cannot reverse; even the sins His believers commit are not counted against them—God does not see them, because they are covered over by the blood of God the Son. Even though the Christian sins, the Church is the sinless Bride of Christ, because the sins have all been atoned for by the Christ and for those who trust in this payment, no sin is reckoned, but only righteousness!

We thank You, Heavenly Father, that You have had mercy upon us for the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ, blotting out all our transgressions and holding us ever in Your almighty hand! Amen.

"And he said, 'Please, show me Your glory.'" (Ex. 33:18)

The Lord answers Moses' request: "you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen" (v. 23b). We too would like assurances. In the face of the manifold frustrations of life, we would like some confirmation; not just a bunch of plagues and divided seas and the cloud and the manna and so forth... Moses, and we, would like to behold the glory of God Himself.

God lets us see a little, but not the unveiled glory. His glory remains concealed; we see only the backside of it. How many times have we poured our hearts out to God, and He has delivered us? We see it in our lives. We see His glory especially concealed under water, under bread and wine, under normal sounding words. On the one hand, it looks ordinary; on the other hand, we know the glory is there.

We may be tempted to think it is not enough. Repent. Receive rather what the Lord is willing to give you: the backside of His glory, a little something to go on, but not so much that faith is no longer necessary. And rejoice, for that faith itself is more of His glory, a gift you could not have "by your own reason or strength."

"Lord God, heavenly Father: forgive my sins, and strengthen my faith, and preserve me therein until the day You receive me into the life of the world to come; through Jesus Christ. Amen."

“The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty.” (Ex.34:6b-7a)

It sounds quite familiar: God...mercy, goodness, truth, forgiving. But then comes that phrase, “by no means clearing the guilty.” Does that surprise you? It should not, but for many modern Christians, it does.

An aspect of God’s perfection is that His justice is perfect. A parent may decide it just is not worth the trouble to correct their child, and pretend not to notice the misdeed. God never does that! It would make His justice imperfect, and God is perfect completely! Because He is a just God, He never “clears the guilty.” Every sin must be punished.

If God could just ignore our sin, we would not need Jesus. Rather, because each sin must be punished, we need Jesus very much! His death on the cross makes payment for all our sin. It satisfies God’s justice, and so opens to us the way of God’s mercy, goodness, and forgiveness.

“Lord God, heavenly Father, grant me so to recognize the guilt of my sin, that I would truly repent of it all, and increasingly treasure the very great gift of Jesus’ sacrifice for my salvation. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.”

Balak understood that silver could buy the favor of men, but could it purchase the favor of God? Balaam, a corrupt prophet who wanted, nonetheless, to be in God’s favor, had to learn the utter importance of his speaking every word from God and only the words that God gave, even as Balak must learn not to entreat God to damn others for you—especially not His own people!

When the Moabites first came to him, Balaam answered them well; yet, when the Lord gave His answer for the second group of princes—that Balaam should go with them if they again asked him to do so—Balaam simply saddled his donkey in the morning to go. Human reason rightly says, “These men would not have changed their minds or rescinded their king’s request, and Balaam clearly understood that, but the preacher of God’s Word is not to act based on reason, but on the Word. Balaam should have waited for the men to call him again; since he did not, the Angel of the Lord (God the Son—the very Word of God Himself—appearing before His incarnation) had to confront Balaam in such a way that He would remember how faithful he must be. As the devil had spoken to Eve through the most subtle of creatures, God speaks to Balaam through one that is often despised.

We gather from these events that faithfulness to the Word must be supreme for a pastor and that he must not bear it trivially, flitting about here and there at every false opportunity, but going where he is called and may be heard, ready to speak it firmly, even though it bring him death. At the same time, we see this comforting truth: Yahweh stands with His people and will not turn from the treaty He has made with His adopted.

O Holy Spirit, grant to Your pastors the strength to preach Your Word faithfully and Your people to hear it always with open hearts, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

# Lesson from the Book of Concord

## Oculi Sunday

### Article II.

Also they [the Lutheran pastors] teach, that since the Fall of Adam, all men begotten according to nature, are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence; and that this disease, or vice of origin, is truly sin, even now condemning and bringing eternal death upon those not born again through baptism and the Holy Ghost.

They condemn the Pelagians and others, who deny that the vice of origin is sin, and who, to obscure the glory of Christ's merit and benefits, argue that man can be justified before God by his own strength and reason.

—The Augsburg Confession

### Article II.

#### Of Original Sin.

The second article, Of Original Sin, the adversaries [the Roman Catholic theologians] approve, but in such a way, that they, nevertheless, censure the definition of Original Sin, which we incidentally gave. Here at the very threshold, his Imperial Majesty will discover that the writers of the Confutation [the Romanist response to the Augsburg Confession] were deficient not only in judgment, but also in candor. For whereas we, with a simple mind, desired, in passing, to recount those things which Original Sin embraces, these men, by framing an invidious interpretation, artfully distort a proposition that has in it nothing which of itself is wrong. Thus they say: "To be without the fear of God, to be without faith, is actual guilt"; and therefore they deny that it is original guilt.

—The Apology of the Augsburg Confession

(The Augsburg Confession was written in 1530, the Roman Confutation responded to the Confession in 1530, and then the Lutheran Apology (Defense) was written in 1531.)

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 12: EXODUS 34:27-35

QUINQUAGESIMA

"So when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him." (Ex. 34:30)

Moses had been in the presence of the Lord, and it showed. He did not realize it, but he had an aura, a glow, a "halo," if you will. It was not his own radiance; he shone only with "borrowed light." Shine he did, nevertheless, and the people respected it.

When our pastors preach the Word of God to us, it is the same. They do not preach their own word to us: they are not to do so! Rather, they preach the Word of God, with truth pulled straight from the pages of Scripture, calling us to repentance and forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ Jesus.

People will sometimes say, "good sermon, Pastor!" But many pastors respond by saying, "thanks be to God." It was God's truth that was proclaimed, the pastor just got to be the messenger. Therefore, let us give glory to Jesus, Who shone with unborrowed light on Transfiguration, and Whose glorious salvation His unworthy servants—from Moses all the way on down to modern pastors—deliver to God's people.

"Heavenly Father, grant me not to be distracted by anything in Your messengers, whether good or bad, but rather to remain focused on the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ, my Savior. Amen."

“Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would go onward in all their journeys. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not journey till the day that it was taken up.” (Ex. 40:36-37)

What a simple truth: the children of Israel went where the cloud was! If the cloud stayed, they stayed. If the cloud moved, they went with it.

It seems obvious. But how many “too clever by half” Street-sophists of today would have argued back then, “I’m tired of the desert. Yes, the cloud is here, but I’m heading to the beach. After all, God is everywhere, isn’t He? So even if the cloud is here, He’ll be with me down at the beach, too.”

Faith just plain does not play that game. The children of Israel did no such thing, and neither should we. Faithfully, we go where God locates Himself. He locates Himself in the proclamation of the Word, and in the administration of the Sacraments. And those things are to be found in church. Dear ones in Christ, go to church! Not because it is the “required work,” but because that is where God, in Christ, gives Himself to you for your salvation.

“Lord God, in Your mercy, deliver me from the temptation to play head games to excuse unfaithfulness. Rather, treasures the Word and the sacraments Your Son has given me, grant me joyfully to receive these gifts again and again, unto my salvation. Amen.”

Once again, a new generation picks up where the old left off, sounding the same cry: “And the 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 our soul loathes this worthless bread’” (v. 5). God’s response comes twofold: first, an act of judgment—second, an act of grace. After sending fiery serpents upon the rebellious people, they repented of their foolishness and begged for God’s mercy. God then instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it up on a pole. Whoever looked upon it, in faith, would be spared of death. It was no superstitious act. Belief was required along with the action.

This event is a type of what Christ did on the cross. “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3:14-16). As many Israelites were bitten by poison, so are we bitten with the poison of sin. As the Israelites were provided a singular antidote to their venom, so is Christ the sole antidote to sin.

Prayer: Dear Father in Heaven, we thank You for sending Your One and Only Son into the world not to condemn it, but to redeem it. Keep our faith always strong in the Crucified One, knowing that it Him alone the sting of death has been vanquished. Amen.



The time of the wilderness exile is nearing its end. After nearly forty years, however, the ones who'd departed from Egypt had nearly all passed away. It was now their descendants whom Moses and Aaron had to deal with. But still, their cries resembled that of their forefathers. This time, though, God did not respond in anger to their rebellion. Perhaps because this was a new generation, He responded in grace instead of judgment. By Moses merely speaking to the rock, it would gush forth water. But Moses did not obey God's command. In fact, when we examine his response, it's evident he perhaps "had enough" of serving as Israel's leader. His patience had come to an end: "And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, 'Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?' Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank" (vs. 10-11).

Moses had called the people "rebels." And by saying "we," he declared that someone besides God was responsible for their deliverance. Lastly, he struck the rock in defiance rather than speaking to it as the Lord had commanded. As a result, Moses would not be privileged to lead the people into the Promised Land.

Prayer: Gracious God, help us to never lose patience with those You've called us to serve. As You've shown endless mercy to us, let us do the same to them. Amen.

## Lesson from the Book of Concord Invocavit Sunday

### Article XXI.

Of the Worship of Saints, they teach, that the memory of saints may be set before us, that we may follow their faith and good works, according to our calling, as the Emperor may follow the example of David in making war to drive away the Turk from his country. For both are kings. But the Scripture teaches not the invocation of saints, or to ask help of saints, since it sets before us Christ, as the only Mediator, Propitiation, High-Priest and Intercessor. He is to be prayed to, and hath promised that He will hear our prayer; and this worship He approves above all, to wit, that in all afflictions He be called upon [1 John 2:1]: "If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father," etc.

—the Augsburg Confession

This text emphasizes the unique relationship between God and those He calls to officially serve Him and His house. The tribe of Levi is chosen from the twelve tribes of Israel to facilitate the public worship and ministry ordained by God. Then the house of Aaron is further honored by being called to serve as members of the ordained priesthood. If anyone else, lacking this divine authorization, should attempt to approach the altar of God in this capacity they are to be killed.

Service at the tabernacle may be performed only at the express appointment of the Lord. While those called to ministry in God's house were authorized persons, they are not to deviate from divinely unauthorized means though. The paragraph just before our text tells of the death of Aaron's sons for offering unauthorized worship (innovative worship). If the sons of Aaron were put to death for inappropriately performing their duties, how dare any person think of performing those tasks without a proper call to the Office of the Ministry?

The New Testament carries no command to kill those who offer unauthorized worship or attempt to approach the ministry in an innovative way. There are abundant warnings though, against approaching Christ's Means of Grace in an inappropriate manner and trying to innovate the Gospel received from Jesus and His Apostles. In this Lenten Season we can rejoice that our sins are forgiven purely by grace, but let us not abuse the grace of God by thinking we have an artistic license of sorts to do with God's Means as we wish. God through Word and Sacrament has provided more than adequately for His Elect regarding how He wishes to come to us and have us come to Him.

Let us rejoice in God's chosen means of ministry graciously sent. Amen.

This entire chapter is dedicated to confirming the priesthood of Aaron. Why confirm what was already known? The doubting, unbelief, and outward rebellion of the Israelites was becoming a plague in its own right. It was threatening the leaders, Moses and Aaron, and dooming the people to destruction: "And the LORD said to Moses, 'Bring Aaron's rod back before the Testimony, to be kept as a sign against the rebels, that you may put their complaints away from Me, lest they die'" (v. 10). And so, to spare God's appointed servants as well as those whom they served, God set up a very unique test that would set Aaron above all the rivals.

There was nothing special or unique about the rods that were brought forth, other than to have tribal names inscribed to attach ownership. All were mere wood—and all were fully dead. Nothing should've happened as the twelve rods were placed in the tabernacle. And yet, Aaron's rod produced life: "Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses went into the tabernacle of witness, and behold, the rod of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms and yielded ripe almonds" (v. 8). Note that not only life was brought forth from death, but abundant life: sprouts, buds, and almonds. There was nothing special in the rod or the man it belonged to, so it was clear that the miracle could only be ascribed to the work of Almighty God.

Prayer: Dear Lord, open our hearts and minds to see Your miraculous providence at work, as you provide daily bread for our bodies as well as our souls. Amen.

It seemed like whatever Moses tried, he couldn't seem to win. First he was accused of "leaving the land of milk and honey," and then he was blamed that the so-called "Promised Land" carried no promise of either milk or honey. Ultimately, the people's complaint was against God, not Moses. And their repeated defiance of God's chosen leader would yield God's wrath in a most severe and public manner: "Now it came to pass, as he finished speaking all these words, that the ground split apart under them, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men with Korah, with all their goods. So they and all those with them went down alive into the pit; the earth closed over them, and they perished from among the assembly. Then all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, 'Lest the earth swallow us up also!' And a fire came out from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering incense" (vs. 31-35).

But even this demonstration of God's judgment could not keep the naysayers down. "On the next day all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron, saying, 'You have killed the people of the LORD'" (v. 41). A resulting plague was sent on the people, killing many thousands more. Only by Aaron's intercession was the number not even more.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us always to have respect for You and those whom You appoint to proclaim Your Word. Let us never fall into rebellion, lest our fate be even worse than was experienced by the rebels in the desert. Amen.

It took three days for the nation to get fully mobilized likely because of the huge numbers of people in the tribes of Israel. The description of this mobilization also resembles that of an army of antiquity and thus reinforces the portrayal of Israel as the Lord's army on the march, with the Lord at its head. Thus the image of Israel as a people victorious over Egypt and moving triumphantly toward the Promised Land is brought to mind.

In this time of Lent as we are called to repentantly look upon our sinful failure to fully engage in the triumphant march toward the promised land of the New Heaven and the New Earth, we also know Israel will not enter Canaan in a few short months. God provides all that His people need to achieve what He wills for them, but we are weak—and though He offers order for our lives we so often choose disorder by refusing to follow the gracious path laid out by Him. God's graciousness is further demonstrated in the invitation extended to Hobab the son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, to join the Lord's elect and share in all the blessings that grace-filled invitation entails.

The tabernacle and the holy things within it are carried in the middle of the assembly so that God's house is thus in the midst of the camp even when the camp is on the march. The reference to the ark emphasizes the fact that the real guide of Israel was not Hobab but the Lord Who dwelled above the mercy seat of the ark. He directed the course of the march through "the cloud."

May the Lord so dwell and guide our lives through His Means of Grace. Amen.

“But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” (11:6) Does not this verse sum up the continual whining of God’s people from Genesis to Revelation. How often do you lament about how tough a life you have, how unfair it is that you must face the trials of your life? How often do you moan about having nothing at all but these Means of Grace (Word and Sacraments) to look at? Complain, complain, complain—although the march through the wilderness lasted a whole generation, only comparatively few incidents along the way are recorded. Almost all of them are variations of the same theme: Israel’s whining and revolts against God’s guidance. The historic narrative of the people of God is not an epic of national heroism; it is not the glorious record of a people willing to suffer hardship for the sake of freedom.

We complain endlessly about how bad we have it—and our Lord Who was crucified for our sins and raised for our justification graciously listens. It has been that way from the beginning—and so it is with us. It is only because the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, because His mercies are new every morning, that we remain His true children and do not turn back to the slavery to self, world, and the devil.

Almighty, heavenly Father, allow us to see Your abundantly gracious hand in all things: every support of body and soul as the fourth petition of our Lord’s Prayer proclaims. Amen.

The events of the Exodus had many twists and turns, even stops and starts. Today’s reading follows the events at Kadesh-barnea, where the people refused to move forward in spite of the Lord’s urging. Then they changed their minds and decided to advance without the Lord’s protection. Without Divine intervention, the Israelites were defeated by the Amalekites and Canaanites. Now they turned on their leaders, Moses and Aaron, the ones who’d been faithful all along: “They gathered together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, ‘You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?’” (16:3).

Korah, the leader of the “gang,” conspired against Moses and Aaron. Not being content with the position of being a “mere Levite,” Korah challenged their callings by declaring that the entire nation was holy. The absurdity of his claim is self-evident when we recall the godless ways of the people since departing Egypt.

Our sinful human nature desires power. It has been that way since the Garden, when the Serpent tempted Eve with being Godlike. How often we must repent of our sinful ways, and suppress the old Adam who continually tries to rise up and take charge.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to daily confess the prominence of our Old Adam. May we find our sole identity in the humility of being Your chosen people. Amen.

The voices were loud against Moses and Aaron, for the people feared what was ahead in the land of Canaan. The reports they had chosen to believe made them cry out for the land of Egypt. In spite of the Lord's promises, they wanted to return to the land from which they'd been delivered. "And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, 'The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight'" (Num. 13:32-33).

Moses tried to calm their fears by pointing out what the Lord had already done for them, but the people would not listen. And because of their hardness of heart, the Lord acted in judgment against them: "Then the LORD said to Moses: 'How long will these people reject Me? And how long will they not believe Me, with all the signs which I have performed among them? I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they'" (14:11-12).

Moses then prayed for God to forgive them, which He did, but the Lord would hold true to His promise that these people would not inherit the Promised Land, with the lone exceptions of Joshua and Caleb, who had not been party to their rebellion.

Prayer: Dear God, may we always remember the great deeds You have done for Your people throughout the ages, that we may never doubt Your providence when we face "giants" in our own lives. Amen.

What is the specific sin that causes Aaron and Miriam to be called to task by the Lord? Is it not a violation of the Eighth Commandment in their attack on Moses and his wife? In so doing they also go down the path of thinking more highly of themselves than they should, the sin that is warned against by Saint Paul in Romans 12:3. This sin though, like every sin, can ultimately be traced back to that original sin in the Garden when mankind desired to be God rather than the blessed beloved children of God.

Though the sin was forgiven by an abundantly gracious Lord there were temporal ramifications for the sin that had to be dealt with. This reality must be faced in our lives when we sin, for being forgiven by God or absolved by the pastor does not necessarily translate into immediate removal of the consequences of our sin in the here and now.

Aaron serves as an example of how we should deal with our own sin in that he does not make excuses or try to shift blame for the sin. He immediately and completely confesses the sinfulness of his and Miriam's behavior, turning to Moses in humility with a repentant request that Moses bring their fallen state before God with a humble plea of forgiveness through grace. Aaron had faith that though they had been rebellious and foolish, the Lord was merciful and longsuffering toward His beloved children. It is also worth noting that Aaron does not forget his place as priest, for his request is for Miriam especially to be redeemed from her judgment.

Lord, through Your Means may we always be drawn closer to You and ever thankful to come repentantly before You as Your servant. Amen.

The use of spies is common practice throughout history, and Deuteronomy 1:20–23 indicates that this directive of the Lord was in response to the people’s request. Thus the very sending of the spies was an expression of God’s grace toward His people who lack adequate faith. We can make all kind of speculation about why the Israelites were concerned or cautious about entering the land that God had promised them, but it is far more important to see ourselves and our own lack of faith in their behavior than to speculate about their reasons for the sin of doubting the Word and will of the Lord our God.

The record of the spy mission describes a land that seems to fulfill the Lord’s promise of an abundant land flowing with milk and honey, for the single grape cluster is so massive it requires two men to carry it between them on a pole. The Lord is faithful even when we are faithless, He is gracious even when we are rebellious, He is loving even when we are angry. Often we insist on spying out, investigating, testing the faithfulness of God in our lives, though the overwhelming evidence is that He is always more faithful than we deserve.

The Israelites had experienced the delivery from Egyptian slavery, the merciful protection of the column of fire and smoke as well as the crossing of the Red Sea, plus the bread from Heaven before this incident—but they still had their doubts about God’s faithfulness. We on the other hand have experienced delivery from slavery to sin and devil in Baptism, the merciful forgiveness of Absolution, plus the true bread of life in Communion—but we still doubt God’s faithfulness.

May the Holy Spirit strengthen our faith this Lenten Season. Amen.

The treachery and horrible lack of faith portrayed in this text is truly sad, and demonstrates how evil such behavior is, for through these words and deeds the leaders of the people are able to lead the people away from the Promised Land and God. The first part of the spies’ report was truthful, but the goodness of the land was offset by their faithlessness which lead them to think the inhabitants of the land were too powerful for Israel to conquer. In their disbelief they failed to acknowledge that God fought for them and would faithfully fulfill His promise.

Their words became exaggerations and distortions meant to terrify the people and discourage them from receiving the wonderful gift of grace the Lord offered. They claimed the inhabitants of the land were descendants of Anak, referencing the Nephilim, in hopes of evoking fear by implying they were more than mere mortals in some way. Implying that Israel could not hope to hold its own with powerful experienced warriors of such great stature. These leaders are entrusted to deliver a faithful testimony of what is discovered in the territory and choose instead to confess a lie meant to mislead the Lord’s people.

This is similar to what we see so often in Christianity today as leaders compromise, falsify, and deny the true (orthodox) teaching (doctrine) of Scripture. They are entrusted to deliver a faithful testimony of what is discovered in the Word of God and choose instead to confess a lie meant to mislead the Lord’s people. Their confession in word and deed misdirect and discourage all from faithfully receiving the Lord’s blessed Means of Grace in all their fullness.

Heavenly Father, through Your abundant grace may this never be true among us. Amen.