

## **Sermon about Num 21, 4-9 on Reminiscere 2024 in Brussels (VI<sup>n</sup>)**

**Blessing:** The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (Amen.)

**Bible:** (4) From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. (5) 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 we loathe this worthless food.” (6) Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. (7) And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. (8) And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” (9) So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

**Prayer:** Almighty God, to whom our hearts are open, our desires are known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the gracious power of Your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love You and worthily magnify Your holy name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Sermon: *Opener – Life is full of detours:*** I have very poor orientation. When I set off for a new destination, I usually need a navigation system and I have to have driven the route several times to know it without help. It's different with my wife. She's really good at finding her way. As a result, I largely switch off my orientation brain as soon as she's in the car with me. But even that doesn't prevent us from getting lost from time to time and having to take a diversion. (Fortunately, we still have our son, who often knows the best routes). Sometimes, when we go on

an excursion, we also like to take different routes, not always the most direct ones. Because that's the only way to see the unexpected. One commentator wrote: "Homer would have had little to say if Odysseus had taken the shortest route home." - Detours initially have a bad reputation. They cost time, money and nerves. But every now and then, and on closer inspection, some detours can be quite helpful and ultimately take us further, even if we have to turn back on the way. In world history, they have often been at the beginning of great discoveries.

**2. Ways through the desert:** Of course, this image can be applied to our lives. Almost nobody in this world always goes in one direction. Time and again, we are forced to rethink paths, take detours. And there are also dead ends in life. Looking back, we always have to realise that some detours would not have been necessary if we had listened to our parents, teachers, partners or other advisors. - That's life. Such forced detours can be painful and take a toll on us physically, but above all mentally and spiritually. If there seems to be no end to such detours, wrong turns and aberrations in life, they can seem like a hardship-filled trek through the desert.

The people of Israel also had to deal with such a desert wandering, both literally and figuratively. And this passage here from the Book of Numbers can also be seen as an example and image of this entire forty-year desert journey from Egyptian slavery to the freedom of the Promised Land. Of course, the journey across the Sinai Peninsula is by no means so long that it would normally take 40 years, even if you are travelling with a whole people and bag and baggage. It only takes 40 years if you are slowed down countless times, get lost and have to take detours. And that saps your strength, physically, mentally and spiritually.

In Hebrew, the people of Israel are described with an adjective in connection with the word breath or soul. Our modern medicine knows the "fatigue

syndrome", in English there is the term "shortness of breath in the soul". Impatience spreads as to when the expected goal will finally appear before our eyes: healing from a long, serious illness, reconciliation in the family, liberation from a difficult relationship. And then comes resentment, then despondency, and in the end, you feel like death. Then you are at the end of your tether in the face of the desert.

The Old Testament uses twelve different terms for desert. The word used here is the most common. But in the following chapter, the desert is described with the word "aravah". This is also where the word for its inhabitants comes from: Arabs. And also the word for evening. This is where the zones mix. In the evening, day and night mix and in this desert beyond the Promised Land, we also find ourselves at a transition, a border zone, a steppe.

**3. Losing track by accusing God:** In this steppe of life, the Israelites begin to grumble at God. Why all this? Why the detours? Our living conditions disgust us! They can no longer see any sense in their outward and inward desert and feel abandoned by God. At the latest with this assumption, they have lost their way, have gone completely astray. We humans are too quick to forget the blessings of the past and become blind to the fact that God always accompanies and goes along with our detours - even when He doesn't consider them necessary or even harmful.

Since the Israelites are a "stiff-necked people", as God realises several times, He sends them yet another dead end to finally stop and think about the way. He sends a stop sign in the form of poisonous snakes. Without God, only death awaits us. That was the case from the beginning and applies to all people. - At the latest, this stop sign, with barrier tape and illuminated barks and rumble strips, so to speak, makes the Israelites wake up. They recognise their situation without God and turn back. They ask their mediator to God and prophet Moses

to ask forgiveness for them. Moses intercedes on their behalf. And this intercession in turn causes God to remember that he had promised the people blessing. God also turns back and offers salvation.

**4. Looking back to God for healing:** God offers a remedy in the form of danger. A symbolic snake, raised high for all to see. The Israelites are asked to turn their gaze back. They should no longer look in the wrong direction and also turn their gaze away from the danger on the ground and look upwards to salvation. When they do this, they trust their God again. This saves and heals them and puts them back on the right path to the promised land.

Of course, we Christians recognise an image of the cross in this, at the latest after the Gospel for this Sunday (John 3:14-15). There, too, death is fought with death. There, too, it is about turning our own gaze and looking up to the cross and our Saviour Jesus Christ and thus trusting God. It is about realigning oneself towards the goal: redemption from a life that sometimes has more, sometimes less deserts in store. It is about hoping for and believing in a better reality, liberated from suffering and our own guilt. Liberated from detours and desert times. That is what our faith is about. And with this, we can also get through times of wilderness.

Sometimes we need detours to get to know ourselves and God better again. This is not always easy, but it is not always a bad thing. As I said at the beginning, detours hold the unexpected in store. We can also encounter them in the form of maturing processes, including in matters of faith. The crucial thing is to see them as opportunities and to use them to refocus on the only means of salvation in life: our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Blessing:** The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.