

Homily based on the readings from March 24, 2026 (Number 21.4-9;
John 8.21-30)

The mechanics of human *memory* are notoriously difficult to understand.

Mark Twain once described memory as “a curious machine and strangely capricious. It has no order, it has no system, it has no notion of values, it is always throwing away gold and hoarding rubbish.”

While he was right that there is a certain *randomness* to how we perceive the past, there is at least one organizing principle that appears to be *universal*: human beings are much more likely to hold onto memories relating to *injuries* we have suffered than to *gifts* we have received.

Today’s first reading, from the Book of Numbers – and, in fact, the entire Biblical account of the Exodus – provides an *incomparable* example of this phenomenon. No sooner had the Israelites experienced the most *incredible* act of salvation in human history, then they started

complaining about almost everything: the food, the water, the difficulty of the journey, the strength of their adversaries:

Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this desert,
where there is no food or water?

We are disgusted with this wretched food!

In this and countless other instances, the Chosen People demonstrated their *utter* inability to remember the *unprecedented* wonders God had already performed on their behalf.

Even though it is tempting to single out the Israelites for their selective amnesia, most of us are guilty of exactly the same fault. Every one of us has been delivered, not from slavery in Egypt, but from bondage to sin and death – through the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ and by the saving waters of Baptism. Nevertheless, at least for most of us, the memory of this eternal reality vanishes the *moment* we face substantial challenges or obstacles in our lives. Although our doubts and self-deceptions may be *marginally* less ridiculous than those of the

Israelites, they are no less deadly. While the infidelities of the Israelites caused them to be attacked by venomous serpents, ours have the very real potential to exclude us *permanently* from the joys of heaven.

By the grace of God, there *is* a cure for both of these afflictions. As we heard in today's reading, Moses mounted a bronze serpent on a pole, the sight of which would heal anyone who had been bitten. From the earliest days of the Church, this action has been viewed as a *prototype* for the Crucifixion. Christ himself makes this observation in the Gospel of John:

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. (3.14-15)

The point, of course, is that whenever we risk succumbing to the poison of our own forgetfulness, the only true antidote is Jesus on the Cross. If we turn our attention to *him*, he will restore our wounded health and deliver us from every evil – and we will *live*.