

King of Glory Lutheran Church
March 13/14, 2021
Year B: 4th Sunday of Lent: John 3:14-21
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Numbers 21:4-9

⁴ From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ 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 detest this miserable food." ⁶ Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷ The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." ⁹ So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3:14-21

¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

There are some things you can always count on in life. And on a road trip it's the complaining. This weekend marks the beginning of spring break for many families and although our traveling has been limited this past year I know some people will be heading out of town this week. If you aren't going anywhere I invite you to think about the last road trip you took.

It's pretty safe to say that no matter who you are with or where you are going there is always someone (might even be you!) who will start complaining on a road trip. It's too hot, it's too cold, I'm hungry, I'm tired, I'm bored and the most well-known road trip question ever...are we there yet? Now imagine if that road trip you were on went on for 40 years.

That's where we meet the Israelites today, on a journey to the Promised Land. There they are in the desert, wandering around, grumbling and complaining. Longing for the good old days in Egypt. They don't like the desert. They don't like the food. They are so miserable that even slavery in Egypt sounds better than freedom in the desert. Apparently freedom isn't what they thought it would be. And the desert is not where they imagined living for forty years.

Sometimes we find ourselves in places we would rather not be. We all know that feeling. And rather than continue on the journey we find ourselves wishing we could just go back.

We each know our own desert places and times, maybe in the past or maybe it is a place you find yourself in today. Maybe you wish you could go back to a time before school became overwhelming with papers and exams. To a time before deadlines and bills to pay. To a time before an illness or injury or death. To a time before your life got complicated, overwhelming or confusing.

We all have known times when we have found ourselves wandering around in a kind of desert, unhappy and lost and frustrated thinking, I just want to go back to where I was before, back to the good old days...things were so much better and simpler back then. So maybe we have something in common with the Israelites today.

The Israelites have been on the road for a while. We know that they complained about the lack of food and God provided manna, bread from heaven. They complained about not having any meat to eat and God sent quails. They complained about not having enough water and God instructed Moses to strike a rock and water began to flow.

Today we meet them complaining again, speaking out against God and Moses. They are tired of the desert and they don't like the food. They would rather be back in Egypt.

When the poisonous snakes come out the Israelites realize that they are on the wrong track. They have lost their way in the desert. And they can't fix it themselves. So what do they do? They repent. They change directions. They ask Moses to pray for them. "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us."

Moses prays for the people and God responds. "The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.'" There in the desert God hears the cries of God's people and gives life through an object of death.

The Israelites must come face to face with a snake on a pole in order to be healed. It sounds pretty strange. Like a magic trick. But this snake on a pole is not magic.

When the people looked at that pole they remembered God who saved them, God who loved them and lived in covenant with them. And when their eyes were lifted up they were healed.

The gospel writer of John remembers Jesus speaking of this story and so we hear it again in our gospel lesson today, "And just 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."

We move from God loving God's people in the desert in the book of Numbers to one of the most well-known verses from the New Testament in John's gospel today. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." And the next verse, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

"God so loved the world..." We are reminded today that the heart of God is not about judging but about saving. The God we know is a God who frees slaves, heals the sick, welcomes the outsider, forgives sinners and listens to us when we cry out. God loves the world. God loves you and me.

As the world cries out in suffering, brokenness and need, God seeks to heal and restore and save. That is the good news we hear from John's gospel today. God sent God's own self to save the world in the midst of suffering, brokenness and need.

Today in our gospel lesson Jesus tells Nicodemus, and through him, us, that he too will be lifted up. Jesus will be put to death on the cross for everyone to see. And it will be his death and resurrection that brings the promise of eternal life.

As followers of Jesus, as his disciples, Jesus calls us to keep our eyes on the cross knowing that Jesus has been there, has defeated death so that we might have new life.

For some the cross is a sign of death. But for those who follow Jesus the cross is where God meets us in our own suffering and sinfulness. Right there in our desert places. Right there in our complaints, in our worries and in our suffering. Right there where we are.

God meets us right where we are acknowledging our pain and giving us hope. Because it is in suffering and the cross that God reveals God's saving grace and love for the world.

As we continue to journey through Lent, through these forty days, God has given us practices that point us to the cross and God's love and grace and forgiveness for us.

Begin each day remembering your baptism by making the sign of the cross and know that you are a beloved child of God marked with the cross of Christ forever.

At meal times place your Lenten offering box close by and remember those who are hungry. Put aside an offering of money or food for those in need.

In your daily devotions reflect on a cross you have in your home, maybe that's a palm cross or a piece of jewelry or a picture, and offer prayers for this world that God so loves.

The good news Jesus gives us today is that because of God's love for us we can love one another.

Because of Jesus' suffering and sacrifice we can show compassion and share what we have been given to those who are in need.

And because of Jesus' promise of eternal life we can live a new life today trusting in God's healing and hope for us and for this world that God so loves.

Amen.