

March 14, 2021 - 4th Sunday of Lent - sermon notes

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3,17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

“From Bondage into Freedom”

During these days when we have been dealing with the restrictions brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic I have found it a little easier to enter into the stories of the Exodus. I realize that only a year's deprivation in no way compares to the 40 year journey but living with the daily uncertainty that has come about from the announcements from the Province or the Health Unit or the Synod Office has given me a taste of what it might have been like. Wrenched from the pattern of life to which they had become accustomed and thrust into a life which depended on the God whom they had only met in stories must have been a very difficult thing to face. Our lives were made more difficult because of a virus and so we may be able to appreciate their plight a little more and more closely identify with the people of God.

When we come upon them in the story from the book of Numbers we meet the large tribe of Abraham's descendants who had been travelling through the desert for almost 40 years. They were very close to the threshold of the Promised Land. Their ancestors had been this close many years before but turned away from entering the land out of fear. In the account we heard from the book of Numbers we are told that this generation had recently engaged an army and were victorious and were now continuing their journey toward the land of Edom. They had asked for permission to cross that land and it was denied so they had to go around the land which added a few extra days to their journey. We know something of the discomforts of plans and expectations being changed - even before the pandemic struck - and so we can easily imagine how complaints might come to the lips of those who were in the company of God's people. They demonstrated, through those complaints, that the 40 years in the wilderness had not made them completely obedient to God's commands. They were heard to grumble about their environment and situation and even disdained the still daily gift of manna. It would seem that they yearned for the bondage from which they had been rescued in Egypt which was evidence that the gifts from God were not appreciated. When my plans are interrupted I can sometimes wish for a return to a former condition - not recognizing the blessings that are all around me. This certainly seems to be the case for the people whom Moses was leading toward their promised land. Through their grumbling they demonstrated that they had not yet become the people God wanted them to be. We are told that poisonous serpents were sent into their midst and many people died as a result. Realizing their guilt the people repented and in an act of pure Grace God instructed Moses to provide a way for people to be healed from the effects of the snake bites by simply looking at the symbol of healing mounted on a pole. The action of looking was honoured by God to bestow the grace of healing upon the person who looked.

In this way a lesson was conveyed regarding the need for faith. The source of healing, deliverance, protection and all the rest was the God who had delivered them from the bondage of the Egyptians and was bringing them to their freedom. From the events recounted it seems that at least some of them retained a portion of their bondage in the form of bitterness and complaining. In a wonderful act of grace God made the offer of healing with no further sacrifice required on the part of the ailing person - a simple act of faith was sufficient.

You and I are not in that same situation as those ancient Israelites at all even though we may be able to draw some parallels. For instance, we too have been delivered from bondage and are being led toward our promised freedom. We too have occasions when we complain about our circumstances and we may have allowed ourselves to doubt God's promise of provision and protection. We too are sometimes brought to repentance and cry out for mercy. The story of the poisonous serpents stands as a reminder that the God who led them into the wilderness did so in order to deliver them into the Promised Land and has promised to do the same sort of thing for all of God's people. Grace has been extended with a wonderful offer of rescue if a person would only look to Jesus.

Moving from that story to the one involving Jesus and the Pharisee Nicodemus, who came to visit him at night, we see Jesus reminding Nicodemus of the story of the bronze serpent by saying, '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.' Moses lifted up the staff with the bronze serpent on it to draw attention to the fact that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was offering a way to be restored to health if people would just believe the gift by simply looking at the staff. By using this illustration Jesus is telling Nicodemus that the same kind of offer, with wider implications, was being made with Jesus filling the role of the serpent on the staff. "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" In the story found in the book of Numbers a temporary, but important, healing was accomplished by an act of grace . Jesus is holding out the promise that an even greater, and permanent, healing would be accomplished by an act of grace - the 'healing' of an entire race of people who don't even realize they are ill. The illness from which they suffer is one which was first experienced in the Garden of Eden when the serpent lured Adam and Eve into abandoning God's ways. This poison has been infecting the human race all along and is at the core of the grumbling seen in the story from the book of Numbers and the general refusal to follow in God's way. In Jesus the people of the world are promised a way to experience life in the age to come which will follow the general resurrection and the restoration of paradise. This act of God's grace can be received through an act of faith. Jesus said it this way in that most famous of scripture verses,

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16) We do not deserve this mercy but it is held out to us by the God who loves and the way to grasp it is to believe. This is an offer of such incredible mercy and grace that words cannot completely convey the message but millions of people have believed and their lives have been changed. Jesus goes on to explain, “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” (3:17) This is Jesus’ purpose - to rescue the world from the destructive path upon which it was travelling from the time of the serpent in the garden. Only God’s way will bring about those conditions of paradise for which our hearts yearn and the gracious offer of God through Jesus is the way in which that process begins.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians picks up the same story in the verses we heard a few moments ago. “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient” (Eph 2:1) “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (2:8-10) The picture as I see it is of a world which has been following the wrong path and which is offered a way to do things right. An offer made out of the loving and grace-filled heart of the God who made them. In order for the world to be restored into the place it was meant to be the bondage of the poison infecting the human race needs to be healed in the same way as the poison from the serpents in the desert needed to be addressed for the people of Israel to become the people who would restore the Promised Land. This too is our story as we walk the path before us today.

As the vaccines which have been developed do their work it is hoped that the pandemic conditions under which we live will be eliminated and we can return to our regular lives. Whenever that happens it will be a very different world from the one we remember and it will be a world that will still need the work of restoration. God has continued that work of restoration, healing and forgiveness and will do so into the future. It will be the people of God - the people whom God has restored - who will be asked to continue God’s work of restoration. The businesses that have been adversely affected, lives which have been damaged, wounds of the spirit which have been inflicted will all need to be repaired, renewed, and restored and you and I and the rest of God’s people will be asked to pitch in with that project. The God who gave us Jesus still loves the world and wants it to become, once again, the paradise it was at first. As we live in our separated bubbles for now may we pray that God’s Holy Spirit continues to bind us together with chords that cannot be broken and renew the face of the earth.