

*Fourth Sunday in Lent*

March 11, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

First Reading: (Numbers 21: 4-9)

From Mount Hor [the Israelites] set out by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 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." Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 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. 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." 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.

The Holy Gospel according Saint John. (John 3: 14-21)

[Jesus said:] "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.

"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.

"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. 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. 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. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 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."

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is the seventy-third day of winter – the seventy-third day – and it is getting old. Anybody getting tired of ice on the road or on the sidewalk? I'll let you know, there are only ten days left of winter. Today is also the fourth week of Lent – and Lent is getting old. Those Lenten practices are looking a little like a burden. Don't you just want to get to Easter?

Of course, this is nothing like those ex-slaves with Moses in the wilderness. Forty days is nothing for people who have been at it for forty years. The reading from the First Lesson today takes place almost at the end of the time in the wilderness. It has been at least thirty-eight years at this point. And here is the hard part. About thirty-seven of those years have been spent with nothing amazing or miraculous happening.

All of those miracles, the Red Sea, the pillar of cloud and fire, the water from the rock, the fire from the mountain, the Ten Commandments, all happened at the beginning. For thirty-seven years now God has pretty much been silent. These people have been living by remembering. They tried to trust the promises. They tried to follow the plan. They tried to learn that God is faithful. But, you know, it has been a really long time. And where they are now is not exactly the Promised Land.

So, after thirty-eight years of it, they are done. They are sick of the silence. They are sick of the lack of progress. They are sick of the food. *“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no food and no water. And we detest this miserable food.”* Think about that one. “There is no food, and we detest this miserable food.”

This question of food is really not a question of food. The food question is really a God question. What is God doing – if anything? Is God there? Have we deluded ourselves into thinking that there is a God who is loving and faithful, and has a plan for us? Are we really all alone in the universe?

This is a God question, not unlike our God questions, our incredibly sincere, deeply aching God questions. We ask them when someone we love has died of disease or violence. We ask them when our own bodies fail us and we can't do what we used to do. We ask when we need guidance for a decision, or reassurance when we are feeling small, “Are you there, God?” “Do you really have my back?” “Are you listening?” “Do you care?” “Do you exist at all?” We ask the same questions as the people who were wandering in the wilderness for thirty-eight years.

They asked the food question that was really a God question. And so God sent snakes. They asked the food question that was really a God question, and God sent snakes. This is not the response I would have made. I would have chosen a five-course meal and a good hot bath. “The food is miserable! Give me good food. And while you're at it, a nice apartment with running water and a refrigerator that's full.”

But God does not always give us what we want. There is a long history of God not giving people what they want. Who could have wanted an ark full of animals? Who could have wanted to have a baby at age ninety, or to lead a mob of ex-slaves through the Red Sea, or to have a mass of snakes appear in the desert? We don't know the mind of God. We can't control or manage what God does. Which, in the long run, is probably a good thing; because, for the most part, we want quick, and we want easy, and we want safe and without cost. A good meal and a hot bath. But God promises life. Life that is rich, and meaningful, and abundant, but never quick and easy.

God is good shepherd and whirlwind. God is mother hen and wind and flame. God is glorious creator and broken man on a cross. We cannot predict or control or manage this God. God never promised to make us successful or comfortable or happy. God promised to give us abundant, eternal life.

This God is bound to us in covenant promises. *“I will not give up on you.” “I will be faithful to you.” “I will find a way for you.” “I will give you life – abundant life, authentic life, eternal life.”* But the journey to new life is hard. It requires deep love and deep sacrifice. It requires the cross and the willingness to trust the crucified one.

The people in the desert asked a food question that was really a God question. And God sent snakes. The Hebrew for snake is “seraphim.” Literally, “fiery messengers.” And there, in the midst of those snakes, in the midst of those fiery messengers, the food question that was really a God question became a faith question. I’ll say that again. The food question that was really a God question became a faith question. A faith question.

Can I trust this God who does not give me everything I want? Can I journey on a way that I cannot see clearly and that is hard? Can I look for healing and life in ways I do not expect and cannot control? Can I believe this God who has promised life and abundance, but in God’s own way and God’s own time? This is a faith question.

Faith is not believing that God exists. It is not thinking about who God is or what God is doing. Faith is trusting that God is now, even now, leading us to new life. Faith is trusting God’s promises enough to be all in. Trusting enough to try to follow in God’s way, try to do the things God asks - like loving God, or loving your neighbor and the earth. Or even looking up at a snake on a pole, or Christ on a cross, and know that this is where healing and life can be found.

The food question that was a God question became a faith question. Could they trust this God that acted in unexpected ways? Notice, in the story of Moses and the snakes, that God does send humans, but God doesn’t take away the danger. God doesn’t take away the snakes. And the food stays what it is – miserable. Healing and new life are there, just not in the way anybody expected. A snake on a stick? Really? Is this what God comes up with?

Jan Richardson reflects:

“When new life comes, when healing arrives, it doesn’t always look like we hope. In the times when healing doesn’t equate with curing, or doesn’t fix the underlying cause of the pain, this can be bitter indeed. In the midst of this, these passages bear witness to a God who is ceaselessly, stubbornly working to make a path for wholeness for us.

If there's anything I have learned on my journey since [my husband's death], is that the path to healing often unfolds by weird, inexplicable turns, as the snake-bitten people of Israel discovered.

This makes some kind of convoluted sense. Because the brokenness that besets us can take such strange forms – be it grief, or illness, or accident, or any of the other ways that life can unexpectedly and senselessly clobber us – it should perhaps come as no surprise that the means of our healing can take strange forms as well.

Even so, I still can find myself surprised by the strange remedies that present themselves – the peculiar graces that visit, the unforeseen encounters that bring comfort or insight, the particular practices of solace that don't always make logical sense and might not fit for someone else, but offer the mending of my heart. I am learning to keep my eyes open to these strange and surprising remedies, to loosen my hold on my expectations of what mending and solace should look like, in hopes of recognizing the remedies when they show up.”

God does not always give us what we want, when we want it, or in the way we were expecting. The challenge of faith is to keep our eyes open for the remedies and the life that God gives. It is to know that God's promises are real. God is leading us to life, slowly, in odd ways, but always forward to life.

And, yes, we will get tired. And, yes, we will complain. And we will find ourselves sometimes surrounded by snakes. But that doesn't change the promises. God will not give up on us. God is faithful. And God is working in this world and in our lives in creative and unexpected ways to bring healing and abundant, eternal life.

Amen.