

Lent 4B
Peace, Seattle
March 15, 2015
Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21

GOD'S CORE VALUES

It happened without fail whenever our family loaded up the station wagon for the hour-long drive to the grandparents. No sooner did we pull out of the driveway than the same old accusations and complaints would start to unfold.

In response to this pattern a family rule was established: NO TALKING 'TIL WE REACH OWATONNA. Since Owatonna was 35 miles up the road, the “no talking” rule guaranteed a half hour of relative quiet...no small feat in a station wagon with 10 people aboard!

Of course, there were times when issues escalated to the point where mayhem was imminent, and then my Dad's voice cut through the din with the seven last words:

DO I NEED TO STOP THIS CAR?!

Now I can't remember Dad ever actually stopping the car; the mere threat of it was enough to make us offenders repent. The truth is, we weren't sure what would happen if Dad ever did stop the car, but we knew it wouldn't be pretty.

So I can identify with the whole situation unfolding in the lesson from Numbers, and I imagine I'm not alone.

Here's Israel, wandering through in the wilderness month after month—supposedly on their way somewhere—when they're forced to back-track around Edom and add even more time to their itinerary. It pushes them over the edge.

This wilderness road is not at all what they'd expected. Trusting God to take care of them, it turns out, is no easy matter. They start to lose heart and lose faith. So what do they do? They complain.

Why did you bring us out of Egypt in the first place? We're going to die in this wilderness!
There's no food, no water, this trip is all one big horrible mistake!

Their complaint, of course, is riddled with amnesia. They've conveniently forgotten that their experience in Egypt, which they recall now so fondly, was an experience of slavery, and that the miserable food they now loath was the miraculous manna that sustained them.

It's then that God stops the car. And, sure enough, the scene isn't a pretty one.
Out come the snakes, and people start dying left and right.¹

Now the snake is one of those ancient symbolic creatures which carry double meaning.

- On the one hand, the snake means craftiness, stealth, and a bite that kills.
- On the other hand, the snake is a symbol of healing. The venom from a poisonous snake provides the raw ingredients necessary to counteract its own poison—i.e. the anti-venom.

So the serpents in this story are ambiguous creatures.

¹Just a little aside here, our NRSV calls them “poisonous” serpents. The old KJV reads “fiery serpents.” The Hebrew word that's used to describe the snakes is “SERAPHIM” the same word used other places to describe a fiery being in the Lord's service.

If we interpret the story in the most basic way, it seems to be saying:

WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T COMPLAIN, ESPECIALLY ABOUT GOD, OR YOU MIGHT END UP WITH SOMETHING WORSE. But maybe there's another possibility.

What if the plague of serpents is not so much about God taking vengeance on the naysayers as it is about God holding up a mirror to them? What do I mean...

The rift between the people and God, the tearing apart of their community, began at the moment the people could no longer trust that God could or would provide for their needs. And that's the core issue on this whole Wilderness Trek—learning how to trust God and live in community.

The snakes act like a mirror, reflecting back to the people their biting criticism and self-centered unfaithfulness, and when they experience this truth, it changes them.

With eyes now opened, they turn back, ready once again to try believing that God can bring them the healing they so desperately need. And indeed God does. Anyone who looks to the bronze snake will live.

For the past 7 weeks our Sunday adult class has been exploring Rules of Life from Christian communities ancient and contemporary. From the earliest days followers of Jesus have asked:

What does living the gospel life in the way of Jesus look like? How must we then live?

In response to these questions, Christians over the centuries have developed core values, habits and practices that define who they are, what is essential to the life of faith, and how they will live in the world.

Studying what's important to other communities of faith is a bit like holding up a mirror:

We get to see more clearly how we ourselves function, what our commitments are, and how entrenched we can become. Seeing the gaps in our thinking and our habits, prompts us to ask where we need to grow in order to become more whole.

As we witness the cross being transformed into a Tree of Life this Lent, there's a growing awareness of the breadth and depth of this symbol of God's saving presence in our midst.

That, in part, is what happening in this story when Moses lifts the serpent on the wooden pole and the instrument of death is transformed into a symbol of life.

Today's gospel lesson from John is all about God's core values—and Jesus expresses them so powerfully and clearly:

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.

By God's mercy, the serpent in the wilderness was transformed from a symbol of death into an instrument of healing. By God's grace, Jesus, nailed to the Tree, became the door, the gate, the bridge to eternal life, resurrected life.

Whether the wounds we experience in life are self-inflicted or due to circumstances beyond our control, we're all searching for a way past our bondage, a clear path toward healing and wholeness.

As we struggle (and often enough fail) to live out our own core values in our homes, workplaces, campuses, capitols, and around the world, we choose to gather beneath this Tree of Life because we trust there is something here for us and for our broken world that no one else can provide.

Beneath this cross, this Tree, we meet a God rich in mercy who calls us to live that redeemed life, that transformed, abundant, new life in Christ, even now.

God's core values teach us that, though our shackles are strong there is no obstacle too great for God to overcome. For the truth we see there in the cross, the truth that used to bind us, has become, through God's mercy in Jesus, the truth that sets us free!

Knowing this is what keeps us coming back here, in spite of everything that goes wrong in our lives.

Today we have come once more to lay claim to "the immeasurable riches of his grace."

To pray for God's shalom in our world.

To sing the story of God's love through the words and melodies of these hymns.

And to meet him at his Table and ingest his promise once more:

The promise that "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved—might be made whole—through him."

Though in every part of our world we may struggle to define who we are, God's core values are clear.

God transforms dead-ends into new beginnings,
contentious conflicts into opportunities for growth,
a cruel means of death into a beautiful symbol of resurrection.

Amen.

Let us pray:

We praise you, God of mercy, that through Jesus we become grafted into your Tree of Life.

"Oh, make our barren limbs to grow, our hands to blossom, and let our lives bring forth such fruit that heals our neighbor's grief and pain."²

² Quotation is from the hymn, *We Raise Our Hands to You, O Lord*. Text by Svein Ellingsen; tr. Hedwig Durnbaugh. Published as hymn #690 in Evangelical Lutheran Worship. The hymn serves as our offertory during Lent 2015.