

*This message was prepared by Rev. Pamela Graf Short for the people of prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church for the fourth Sunday of Lent in the year of our LORD 2018. It is based on and supported by the following scriptures:*

**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 3:1-17**

**1** Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

**2** He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

**3** Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

**4** Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

**5** Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

**6** What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

**7** Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above."

**8** The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

**9** Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

**10** Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

**11** "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.

**12** If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

**13** No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

**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.

Let's face it.

Today's Bible story from the Book of Numbers

is weird;

it is disturbing;

I don't like it.

If Jesus hadn't fussed about it,

I would be very tempted to ignore it;

to tuck it far away from the ill and the wandering;

from the worn out and the hungry;

from the old and the young.

But Jesus not only mentions the story,

he pairs his own death with this troubling tale. Alas! Perhaps it is a necessary part of our Lenten journey.

As you may recall, we are talking about a covenant God;

a God who delivers the people of Israel from Egyptian slavery and is ready to take them to a land of promise flowing with milk and honey,

but they are afraid to enter the land because of the strength and number of people living there.

God is disappointed with their lack of faith and courage and assigns them a 40 year sentence of wandering in the wilderness.

While this sounds like a severe punishment—think about it.

It is a discipline with a promise of hope at the end.

If it had been up to the people themselves,

they would never have entered into the promise,

but actually returned to slavery in Egypt.

Commentators think that this story may have occurred somewhere near the end of that 40 years.

I think this makes it even more odd.

Surely they had been counting the days and would have known the end was near;

perhaps it was simply a matter of doubt; or maybe a matter of grief.

You see Moses' brother Aaron died shortly before this story takes place and they spent 30 days officially mourning his death.

Then people pose a question to God:

Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?

Perhaps God doesn't answer their question because, though it does hold the fate of many, it is not quite accurate.

God did not deliver the people of Israel **so that** they may die in the wilderness.

God liberated the people of Israel from slavery **so that** they could live freely in a covenant relationship with God.

The fact that the generation who was delivered is now dying in the wilderness is because they refused to enter the promised land.

Likewise, the focus of their complaint is not really about dying, but about eating.

One moment they claim to have nothing to eat and the next they call the food they have been given "miserable" or "cursed". I would complain too if I ate the same cereal 3 times a day for almost 40 years, though my friend pointed out to me this week that a large portion of the world's population eats the same mash day after day because it is all they have and for that, they give thanks.

And now what about God?

The God in this story does not fit into a box wrapped in lovely paper and tied up with a bow.

On the one hand, this God appears wild and punitive;

on the other hand, this is a Covenant God who will go to great measures to keep the people from returning to slavery; a covenant God who is willing to discipline us in order to get us to turn from sin and turn toward promise;

to turn from lying about our situation

and turn toward living in the truth;

to turn from poisoning ourselves and others

and turn toward life.

Ah, the poison.

Commentators are in some agreement that snakes were sent because they are representative of the trouble within the soul of the people;

that the people's inner most thoughts are poisonous, dealing death to their own spirits

and to the spirit of their community.

The bronze snake was the image of death, of poison. As they looked upon it, they had to remember their own sin, their own poison. They could not escape it.

Maybe part of my problem with the story is my unwillingness to see the poisonous nature of my own sin.

I might even on occasion see that my sin is hurting others, but I seldom admit that it is poison in my own soul; that it releases a venom that shrivels the goodness that God placed in me; that it bites into my spirit and begins a gangrenous process that I am not even aware of until it is too late.

In the same way the cross is death

and on the cross Jesus became sin for us.

When I look at the cross in our sanctuary today,

I see one of the most beautiful crosses I have ever seen.

It is a very important symbol for which I am regularly grateful.

It helps us focus on God's love;

It helps us honor Jesus' sacrifice,

It marks our sanctuary so that people of enter know that in this a place where Jesus is being remembered.

I was speaking with Bruce Seeger about it a couple of weeks ago. He was talking about needing to pound out the metal in order to shape it. In other words, it was brutal before it was beautiful.

The same is true of the original cross where Jesus was lifted up;

The Roman cross was brutal.

The Son of Humanity was whipped until his skin was torn open;

His hair matted with blood that dripped from each thorn of the mocking crown;

nails pierced and pulling at his hands and feet;

blood and water flowing from his side sliced open by a Roman soldier's blade.

If you remember your stomach turning when you saw the news clips of Isis militants cutting off the heads of people, you know a little of what it might feel like to actually stand beneath the cross of someone being crucified.



To consider the cross of Christ then,  
is to consider our own poison and our own violence;  
our own destruction and our own sin.  
As in the serpents in the wilderness,  
the point is not to condemn us,  
but to turn us away from sin and bring us back into a covenant relationship with our God.

We often think of the cross and resurrection of Jesus as the means to our eternal salvation;  
and indeed in John 3 Jesus makes this very point.  
But it is important to remember that the word that gets translated “saved” in the New Testament may also be translated “healed”.  
The people were to look upon the serpent in the wilderness that they might be healed.  
Likewise, when we come to the cross of Christ,  
we come to a place of healing;  
healing that begins in our earthly lives and continues into eternity.

Note also that Jesus’ talk of the cross comes right after his chatter about the necessity of the Holy Spirit;  
the Spirit that blows around us  
and through us  
and beneath us  
and above us;  
the Spirit that cannot be seen,  
but is as real and as wild as the wind  
and as loving and as powerful as a birthing mother.  
This is the Spirit that meets us at the Cross and quickens within us new life in Christ;  
nourishing our spirits with the love and devotion of our covenant God.

Perhaps the pain in your life is as fiery as a snake bite;  
perhaps the snakes in your life have been fierce and deadly;  
perhaps you are like Nicodemus, religious,  
but none-the-less somehow perishing  
and in need of being born from above.  
Whatever your need is today,  
you are welcome to come,  
to look upon the Cross,  
and to know that the love Jesus has for you is one that takes in poison and releases healing;  
a love that meets death and brings life.

Now may our God of the Cross  
The One who is lifted up for your sake and for mine  
Quicken you with mercy  
Embrace you with compassion  
And heal you with mystery, honor and joy and peace  
Now and for all eternity.  
Amen

