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The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Numbers 21

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I wonder if you have a friend who always wants to take the scenic route. “No, no let’s not take the toll road,” they say. And you want to tell them, looking at the map, “You know the tolls cost like 90 cents, and will save us three hours.” The scenic route. Have you ever noticed how hard it is to relax on scenic routes? The two lane roads, the hairpin turns, the locals doing that unconscionable thing of actually driving the speed limit, not to mention the total lack of cell service. “Why are we taking the scenic route?” I think it’s the way Israel felt traveling with God.

“From Mount Hor the Israelites set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom.” Israel should have been used to it. They’ve traveled with God for an entire generation now. They were freed from captivity in Egypt, led through the Red Sea, and they thought they were on their way to comfort, stability, health, and salvation in the Promised Land. But God decided a different route than the direct one. “Is this wilderness road a shortcut?” “No, but it will only add 40 years or so.”

The text tells us that Israel became impatient on the way. Well, yea! They didn’t just become impatient; this pent-up frustration spilled out and they spoke “against God.” “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” That’s an amazing question.

Isn’t it interesting that Israel missed its slavery in Egypt? What a strangely understandable phenomenon. Even here, on the cusp of something big, knocking on the door of the Promised Land, they missed their bondage, their servitude. Why? It was predictable. Comfortable. They knew who they were. Maybe they didn’t exactly miss the life they led, but maybe they now miss the familiarity of it. There’s something deep in human nature, isn’t there, that often prefers the familiar miseries to the unfamiliar mysteries, the miseries that we know to the mysteries that we don’t know?

But I’ve also wondered if Israel hasn’t adequately grieved their former life in Egypt. Their familiar, predictable, oddly comfortable way of existence. To follow God, you know, doesn’t mean that you won’t have grief. I think it means just the opposite. I think following this Radical God along the scenic route of life we have to surrender our sadnesses more than others. This God won’t leave us still. This God wants us to keep moving. We are on a journey. We weren’t meant to set up residence in the past.

Well, the scenic route gets pretty strange pretty fast. Just

when we start to complain, wondering where in the world we are going, we pull off to the side of the road and are all of sudden encountered by a lot of snakes. The text is more forceful than that – God didn't just lead us to a place where there are snakes; the text says, "Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died."

God sends snakes. What can this possibly mean? God sent snakes to punish his people, and some actually died. Really? This is exactly the reason many people, maybe you, have no idea what to do with the Hebrew Scriptures. So here, yes, we need some imagination; literalism will literally lead us nowhere helpful. Just think of the serpent in Israel's imagination. Where did they encounter it? Of course, in the Garden of Eden. The snake bit Eve so to speak with its offer of the knowledge of good and evil. The serpent is the wise but wily one, who offers us good things, but isn't always good in intention. The serpent is temptation.

I wonder what the temptation was that actually took life from Israel, killing some of them. Was it, as we've said, the temptation to long for the familiar misery, rather than the unfamiliar mystery? Maybe it was the temptation to forget that life is more a journey and less a settling?

Or maybe it was the temptation towards impatience – maybe that's it. I'm on a committee here at the church (well actually I'm on like 700 committees) and in one of them I sent an email out asking if anyone had any ideas for an upcoming happening. I sent the email and waited the customary 24 hours for a reply. Crickets. I decided to be extra gracious and extend the window to 48 hours. No reply. After 48 hours, I just assumed it was all up to me. I wonder if that is true in our spiritual life as well. We reach out to God in prayer, and if we don't hear back, I don't know, within a day or two, we just assume it's all up to us. Impatience is always tempting.

The strange gift of temptation, the gift of the serpent, is that it inclines you towards prayer. And that's just what we see Israel doing.

"So Moses prayed for the people." And God acts. But note carefully, does God do what the people asked? They asked, "Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." And God says, "I've got this. Here's what you're going to do, Moses: 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.'" The ask was for God to take the snakes away. To heal

their problem. To make it go away. A reasonable request. God's counter-proposal is to put a bronze snake on a pole.

What in the world do we make of this? What is God showing us on this detour? Now it feels like we are getting to something near the root of this thing. You don't need me to tell you that the venom in Israel's bloodstream, at this point in the story, is fear. Underneath the impatience and the complaining, humanity's ancient snake bite is fear. That's their most enduring temptation. Fear that God can't be trusted.

I often think of fear as those funhouse mirrors at a carnival or county fair – you know those mirrors that distort our images and make us look weird and funny, making it impossible for anything like self-respect. Fear distorts that beautiful and lovely image of God that is our truest selves.

Look on the snake and live? I wonder if when we look on the snake lifted up, it is healing because we are no longer running from it. Is that what prayer is, a lifting up of our fears? You are quietly acknowledging that God, and not fear, is your Guide through life. Your tiny little fear lifted up, as it were, against the expanse of the sky. You gain perspective.

I've come to love Numbers 21 this week, but my love for this text pales in comparison to the Gospel writer John. John loved this strange little story, and how I've been reading Numbers is inspired by him – John looked for divine symbols everywhere. Scripture wasn't this book to be rationally dissected and tried to make logical sense of, like a frog in a biology lab. Scripture wasn't a history book about a long-ago people. Everything in scripture – in Hebrew Scripture - was something like a safari of Living Symbols bearing witness to Infinite Love becoming Historical Flesh. And I'm tempted to say this particular passage offers the central symbol to understanding John's belief about the Crucifixion of the Son of God.

Just before that most famous verse in the entire bible John 3:16, is this: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." Jesus as the One lifted up, and somehow in that lifting comes our healing.

Here's the story the liturgy will tell us in the coming weeks, perhaps illuminated by Numbers 21: Jesus walked around healing the sick and the snakebitten; absorbing the fear of those

he encountered and breathing out divine power and love upon them. That's what the cross shows us. The cross is a revelation of the human heart. What does fear do? Ultimately fear wants to crucify love. The irony is that it was the fear of the religious leaders, the most spiritual and holy, who put Jesus down. He was a threat to their fear. And he was crucified. But among his last words, as he was lifted up, were, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Which is his way of coming face to face with fear, and hate, and grief, and anger and saying – I'll bear your fear, and I'll take it all to God's heart. *You really don't have to carry it anymore. Live freely. Sacrificially. Courageously. Joyfully. Let your heart be free. Ill carry your fear.*

We're told that living like that is Eternal Life. Never mind just after you die. We can know it now.

And so to end where we started: I do wonder how much of our lives is really a fear of the scenic route. We just want to get there. Wherever there is. A healed relationship with our child. Financial security. A new job. A clean bill of health. We just want to get there. We all have our Promised Lands. And here's the question this very strange text from Numbers 21 raises for us: If you get to your Promised Land, while your heart is still caught in the Realm of Fear, will you really have arrived anywhere new?

The thing about temptation is that it leaves us a choice: we can either let ourselves and our fears lead, in which case we'll spend huge amounts of energy worrying about what's coming next; or we can contemplate the Holy One who called us into being, and who gives our souls permission to do what fear never allowed them to do: to relax a little, and to take in more of the Scenic Route that is this strange but holy gift called life with God.

