

St. Paul's Congregational Church
March 11, 2018, Numbers 21: 4-9; John 3: 14-21
Lent 4B: No Matter What
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I don't know about you, but snakes are not my favorite creatures. Remember that spring like day a couple weeks ago? I was in my front garden trying to clean out the iris plants from last year, getting the leaves gathered so I could see the crocuses and snowdrops that were blooming – they still are, under the snow. I reached for what looked like to be a stick in the midst of other debris until I looked a little closer – that stick had eyes and it a forked tongue that was very active – well. It's only the 2nd snake I've ever seen in my yard – it was only about 6" long, a small garter snake – but it did get my heart beating faster. Haven't seen it again and I wonder if it's survived two nor'easters. I really don't like snakes – any more than I like spiders or bats. I can do without them all, thank you very much. All God's creatures got a place in the choir – true enough, but not in my house or yard.

This 21st chapter of Numbers has a curious story – the Israelites have left Egypt, away from the bondage of slavery on their way home to the promised land under the leadership of Moses. They've been wandering around, far longer than any of them expected. It wasn't long before they began to complain, to murmur. Murmuring – isn't that a great word? It means, though, moaning and groaning. So as they stumbled through the wilderness, instead of believing the promises of God, they became more and more upset – they blamed God. They blamed Moses. Signs of rebellion – a mutiny – they would get rid of Moses and get a new leader who would take them back to the bondage of Egypt. Imagine some of the people saying, "I told you so....I was never for this new fangled way of doing things! Now we've got all this trouble and heartache. We were better off in Egypt!

Complain. Complain. Complain. Murmur. Murmur. Murmur. And this isn't the first time the people complained – poor Moses – must have been tough to be the leader of this group.

And God is so angry that he decides to teach these Israelites a lesson – and sends venomous snakes to bite them. Many are attacked. When people began to die, the people remaining went to Moses, acknowledged their lack of trust in God – again – and begged to be rid of the serpents.

God tells Moses to fashion a snake – a symbol of fear and a symbol of death – and fix the snake upon a pole. A person bitten by one of the live snakes and see it and live. The people had to face the symbol of their fear, place their trust in God who was always with them. They only had to look upon the snake and live.

Let's give the people of Israel a break here – they were in the middle of the desert. Things were really awful. They looked at all those years of slavery with rose-colored glasses: maybe things had been much better back in Egypt. At least they had better food, a place to settle. At least they had a place to come in out of the sun. Maybe it wasn't so bad after all – it was a known thing – they didn't know how their journey was going to end up, really. It was a hard, hard, hot trek through unknown, sometimes hostile territory. There's that expression: the devil we know is better than the devil we don't know....

Isn't their story our story. How many times have we given up on our journey because the way was too hard. Women leaving abusive partners. Students in the middle of a hard course. Decisions about career changes, about moving away from home. Trying to break free from any number of addictions. Too much change makes us uneasy – frightens us. We don't like to be unsettled, do we – you all have your own list.

And for us here, there's the pondering, discerning, the future of our ministry here at St. Paul's. It's a difficult, challenging time for us, isn't it. We had our annual meeting last week – lots of good things happened last year – lots of activity including housing the Food Pantry, an energized spirit among us – but again, we face an uncertain future with another budget deficit, with the challenges of an aging building, of a smaller congregation. Yes, we still have some reserves, but, to use the image of the Numbers passage, the snakes still seem to be closing in. And this can get discouraging – just like the Hebrew people found, sometimes it just seems harder to go on than it would be to go back. But, friends, we know we can't go back – we are being called forward into a new life – just like the Hebrew people were. At God's command, Moses takes the evil, the source of fear, the snake, and turns it into a dark, mysterious symbol of salvation. In the hands of God, God's people are punished, but God's people are also saved by the snake. We can't explain why, but we feel the power of this story.

And here's the thing: the Hebrew people do eventually come into the Promised Land.

The story in our gospel lesson begins with Nicodemus, a Pharisee, coming to see Jesus under the cover of darkness. He's heard Jesus speak of the necessity of being born anew, and taking this literally, could not bring

himself to believe that someone grown up can be born again. So he decides to talk to Jesus about this – how can this be? Why does he come at night, secretly? Maybe he doesn't want to be seen by other Pharisees – and we can understand that knowing the events that are about to come. But he comes anyway – he wants to get an answer to his question, despite the risk.

It's just as much a challenge for Nicodemus to stand up and be counted as it is to us sitting here in this church in 2018. It is just as much a challenge for us to come out of the cover of darkness and into the world of light – how many times have we hidden too.

This God who caused the serpent to be lifted up in the desert is the same God who has lifted Jesus up. This is how God saves the lost, this is how God seeks them, us, out, this is how God shows mercy, love, kindness to all of creation, to every one of us. This is the heart of the gospel: for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.

We're centering today on the theme of God's grace in the midst of suffering and brokenness. We remember that Lent, like the entire Biblical story, is really about God's great love for the world.

The story of the people of Israel wandering around in the wilderness is our story too. We have our own wilderness – each of us. We wander aimlessly too. We get off track too. We have snakes all around us too.

Nicodemus is more than a fuzzy character from a dim past. Nicodemus is each one of us. We all sometimes choose darkness rather than light too.

But if the story of the Hebrew's unfaithfulness and their unwillingness to trust in the God of their ancestors is our story, then the story of God's continued faithfulness is our story too. And if Nicodemus' fears and hesitations are our fears and hesitations, then the story of God's light coming into the world is our story too. And isn't that good news.

How, then, do we respond to such a love?

First, we must be a people who focus, who work hard to get our priorities straight. That's easier said than done – we all know that. We get caught up in what's possible, we get caught up in “the way we've always done it”. We get caught up in the details of everyday living. And don't we get hung up on what we don't have, what we want, rather than what we do have – the blessings that are all around us. We're not that different from the Hebrews, are we. We get stuck on events of the past or we spend too much time comparing ourselves to others.

We forget the first commandment: thou shall have no other gods before me. And we forget the commandment that says, thou shall not covet. We all do it.

So the task of Lent is to refocus our priorities, to refocus on putting God first. Maybe we give something up during Lent – or maybe we take something on during Lent – one of our members is making prayer shawls during Lent to give away. Others are bringing food for the Food Bank or spending time volunteering to help others. Still others are making a special effort to spend time in prayer, in Bible study, in devotion during this season. Practicing a discipline to enter into a new relationship with God.

As we journey together as church during Lent, let's be people of focus - we're all on this journey, this spiritual journey together as individuals and as a gathered body of Christ. Where have we been? Where are we going? Let's focus on that. And let's talk about it, together.

Two monks, on a journey together, came across a woman standing beside a river. The woman was very beautiful and the water was too deep for her. One of the monks lifted her onto his shoulders and carried her across, and set her down. And they continued on their journey. The second monk was astounded. "How could you do such a thing? You know our vows. It was very sinful of you to touch that woman, let alone carry her across a stream."

And the monk went on and on about the sin of his companion, until finally the first monk interrupted him, "Brother," he said softly. "I may have been wrong in what I did, but I set her down by the side of the river. Why are you still carrying her? Why are you still carrying on?"

There are so many things in our lives that seek to distract us from our spiritual journey. Some of them need to be done. Some of them need to be left by the wayside – none of them should be allowed to distract us from our spiritual goals.

Isn't it true that one of the easiest ways to lose focus is by lamenting over what should have been done at one point in the past? We're all great with the shoulda, woulda, couldas, aren't we. We all know that the best time to plant a tree was 25 – 40 years ago. But if not then, the second best time is now.

Lent allows us to focus on how we journey into the future. Lent allows us to leave the past where it belongs: in the past. What's holding you back? What's holding us back as church?

Along focusing on priorities, let's face the fears and those things that keep us from being the people God would have us be. This facing of the past and the facing of fears is essential for so many different kinds of healing. Ignoring a problem doesn't make it go away – we all know that. So many times, part of the healing process is turning around, facing the problem, the pain, and confronting it – just like the Israelites turned and

faced the snake, the symbol of all their fears. Once the past is confronted, it no longer has the same hold on us. Once the past is confronted, its power is reduced. Once the past is confronted, it stops being a burden. And don't we know, that putting down those burdens isn't easy – the heavier they are, the harder they are to shed.

What fears, what hurts, what anxieties must we face? What are the snakes in our lives today?

And, let's re-discover the experience of grace. We've been told again and again that it's a gift – we can't earn it. This understanding has to move from our head to our heart, to our very soul, so that it is truly part of our lives. God loves us. God wants us to be the whole and complete people we are created to be. But that's because God loves us, not as a condition of that love. We are called to savor, enjoy, that love, just as we enjoy any gift that has been carefully selected for us.

Our journey is really a journey into wholeness – for us as individuals and as the community of St. Paul's church. It's a journey where those things we fear the most can be the source of healing, strength, and new growth. The journey of Lent is one where we can come face to face once again with the love and grace of God, offered to each one of us as a free gift. Our journey is one which requires focus and concentration because there are so many things that seek to distract us from our goal. It is a journey that will take us to the cross. And then it will take us to the glory of Easter which is the ultimate gift of God and the ultimate gift of God's grace. Come, then, to receive the strength you'll need, to receive the strength we all need for the journey to the Promised Land. And let us make our journey together, secure in the love and care of our God. Amen.