Sermon for March 14, 2021

Numbers 21:4-9

I have long been amused by the constant whining of the Israelites in the wilderness.

I get that it was a hard journey. They walked a long way. There were no cars, no Safeway, no pop up tents and air mattresses. They didn’t have GPS to tell them how much longer their journey would take. And they weren’t even sure where they were going.

No wonder they complained.

I have to imagine there were times Moses wished he’d never seen the burning bush.

In the portion of their story that we hear today, the Israelites are once again complaining about a lack of good food and water. God decided to respond to this bit of whining by sending poisonous serpents among the people. They immediately repent and beg Moses to intervene and get God to relent.

What amuses me about this story is that God offers a solution that *doesn’t* involve removing the serpents. Which, clearly, God could have done, since God put them there in the first place.

Over and over throughout the 40 years in the wilderness, the Israelites whine, “We should have just stayed in Egypt! Why did you bring us here? We should go back.”

Somehow, they’d forgotten how lousy life in slavery was. They allowed themselves to think that their previous lives of pain and suffering and oppression were better than having to travel through the wilderness toward the better place that God had in mind for them.

I’m increasingly convinced that the root of a lot of our discontent is fear. For the Israelites, it was fear not just of what their present reality was like. It was fear of the future, even if they didn’t realize it.

When they were slaves, they wanted change. They wanted to be free. They wanted the Egyptians to stop being awful to them. But the problem is that change doesn’t come about without *us* changing. And who wants to do that? We’re fine. It’s *other* people who need to change.

The Israelites resisted God and said they wanted to go back to Egypt because they were afraid of what lay ahead for them.

Instead of sending them back to a place where they couldn’t thrive, instead of removing the serpents, God asked them to trust that God would heal them and lead them to a better life.

The Bible begins with the stories of creation. We hear that God created us to be in relationship with God. God walks in the garden and talks to the people.

It takes almost no time at all for the people to wander. Another pesky serpent is part of that story. From that moment on, the rest of the Bible is all about God trying to get us back into relationship with God. And the many different ways we come up with to wander from God.

As Jesus says in our Gospel text, people love darkness rather than light.

The Israelites would rather have formed a “back to Egypt” committee that allowed them to revel in their nostalgia for better times than admit that they weren’t that great after all.

They would rather have gone back to slavery than embrace the possibilities that God was leading them to. Their fear kept them from seeing how God was offering them a chance to be who they were created to be.

Rather than risk the pain of change, of growing a stronger relationship with God, rather than trust in God, they wanted to trust in themselves and take their own path. But it would only have led to sorrow and hardship and pain.

Today, we can look at this story and wonder how the Israelites could have thought they would have been better off in Egypt. We can wonder how they could think that a second version of slavery would be a better choice than traveling to the Promised Land.

But fear is a powerful motivating force. And we are far from immune from it today.

It’s been a year since the world changed for us. A year since we could gather safely without worrying about maximum occupancies. A year since we could lift up our voices together in song. A year since we could gather together for study or fellowship over a cup of coffee and a slice of pie.

And now, as hope breaks through the sorrow of the past year, we have a lot of choices to make.

Primary among them is whether we’re going to form our own “back to Egypt” committee and allow nostalgia to tell us that none of the changes in the past year need be permanent. That we can just slip back to the way things used to be, because they were just fine.

But what if God has been using this time in the wilderness to lead us to something better?

Not that God sent the virus among us like the poisonous serpents, but that God is accompanying us as we make our journey through the wilderness, leading us to a better place, longing for us to grow in our relationship with God.

It has been a brutally hard year. In this country alone, hundreds of thousands of people who otherwise would not have died in the past year are no longer with us. Businesses have closed. People have lost their jobs, their homes. We have all suffered from loneliness, despair, and anxiety.

Forming a “back to Egypt” committee might appeal to our nostalgia. And I’m not suggesting that for us here in this congregation that things weren’t good 54 Sundays ago.

But we have wandered through the valley of the shadow for a year. We are not the same people we were on March 15, 2020.

And there has been good in the past year. We have learned to be more creative, to be more flexible. Relationships have been strengthened. We’ve had an undeniable lesson on the importance of being mindful of the affect of our behavior on others.

We can choose to trust in God, to open our hearts and minds to the possibilities of where God is leading us.

Or we can choose the safety of nostalgia. The comfort of allowing ourselves to think only *other* people need to change, because we’re fine, thank you very much.

The story of the Israelites reminds us that, whatever path we choose, God will not give up on us, will not stop looking for ways to draw us from the darkness of our sin into the light of God’s love.

The question for us always is how we respond to God’s immeasurable love and mercy. Just as with the Israelites, God is asking for us to trust God and to follow where God is leading us. For surely, God is leading us to a place where all can thrive and become who God has created us to be.