Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 10, 2024

Numbers 21:4-9

 I like a good road trip. We’ve done several over the last 32 years, and we’re planning another for later this year.

 As much as I enjoy the long drives we’ve done, they’re always a break from day-to-day life. At the end of the week, we’re home again, back in our normal lives.

That wasn’t the reality for the Israelites in the wilderness.

All the usual stuff of life kept happening as the Israelites made their way from Egypt to Mt. Sinai, from Mt. Sinai to the Promised Land. Babies were born. People got sick. People argued and, hopefully, made up. People died.

Doing all those things while just trying to get from point A to point B, ***and*** while trying to *survive* from one day to the next, had to be exhausting, all while trying to learn how to be freed people after generations of slavery, had to be exhausting.

It’s no wonder that, as we hear today, “the people became impatient along the way.”

And I love the way they whine this time: “There is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”

So…there’s no food, but the food is awful?

I think the food is just an easy outlet for their general discontent here. They’d been through ***a lot*** and just wanted to be settled somewhere. To have life just not be so ***difficult*** all the time.

To be clear, this isn’t the only time they whine. The only time they speak up against God and Moses. The only time they suggest that life enslaved in Egypt was better than what they were experiencing. If anything grows in abundance when we’re in the wilderness, it’s the kind of doubt that makes us whiny.

But God handles it differently this time. By sending poisonous serpents. That bit the people. And some of them died.

Which, I’m not going to lie, seems kind of harsh.

That God responded this way makes me wonder just how much the people were whining. Because they seem to have hit God’s limit for it.

But at least the people have enough self-awareness that they realize that they’ve brought this on themselves, by sinning against both God *and* Moses.

They ask Moses to intercede, so Moses prays for them, and God tells him to make a serpent and put it on a pole, and everyone who gets bitten going forward can look at it and they’ll be OK.

Moses does this, and it works.

The people bit by a serpent look at the bronze serpent and they don’t die.

Which means….the serpents are still there. Still biting the people. Still causing them to suffer.

God doesn’t remove the problem when the people stop whining. It would have been kind of cruel if that had happened, I think. Manipulative, really. And that’s not how God works.

Instead, the people learn that when they trust God, when they are obedient to what God asks of them, they might still suffer, but they’ll be more aware of how God is providing for them.

It makes for a complicated story, and it doesn’t allow us to find an easy response. But few good lessons are easily learned.

The wilderness, whether literal or metaphorical, is a hard place to be. And sometimes, we’re not even aware that’s where we *are* until we’re well into it. It’s not like we usually get a sign that says, “Welcome to the wilderness. Last chance for ice cream, chocolate, and other comfort items for 3 months and 6 days.” Nor do we always have a clear sign that we’ve made it to the other side.

We all have wilderness times. Times when life is changing in ways that feel beyond our control. So we not only have to deal with the *whatever it is* that launches us into the wilderness, we also have to deal with *all the rest of the stuff* of daily life.

What we see in this text, in the whole story of the people in the wilderness, is that it’s a hard place to be. Doubt grows like the wild blackberries here on the coast, invading us and taking root, and feeling impossible to get rid of.

We seek the comfort of the known when we’re in the wilderness, just as the Israelites did. It makes us nostalgic for days gone by, tricks us into thinking the past was better than actually was.

But you know what was lurking under all the whining the people were doing in the wilderness?

They were still seeking God. They were still trying to learn to live faithfully as people God had redeemed from slavery.

It was just hard to remember God’s past and present faithfulness the midst of their suffering.

In this weird little story, God showed the people that being faithful doesn’t mean we won’t suffer. But faith can help us make sense of our suffering. Can help us see how God is at work in the midst of our suffering, providing and comforting and accompanying.

Time in the wilderness makes us want to wrestle control away from God. Or tell God how to solve all of our problems, which is really just another form of trying to be in control.

 It’s going to frustrate us to no end that God’s not going to solve our problems by taking them away from us.

 But what we see in this story, and throughout the Bible, is that when the people cry out to God in distress, in anger, in sorrow, in frustration, God responds. God does not remove the source of suffering, but meets us in it, provides for us, weeps with us, and accompanies us.

 It just might not be the way we’d expect. Or choose.

 For the Israelites, they got another sign to look to, to go along with the rainbow, to be reminded of God’s works of salvation.

 For us, we get the cross, as a reminder of the enormity of God’s love. A reminder that God knows the pain of betrayal, denial, suffering, and death.

 It’s not the bronze serpent that took away the people’s suffering. It was trusting the God who said it should be created.

 It’s not the cross that takes away our sin. It’s trusting in the God who willingly hung on the cross and showed us what God’s love looks like in the face of rejection.

 We get this text paired with some of the most familiar words in the Bible, John 3:16-17.

 It can be hard to remember those words of promise when we’re in the wilderness. It can be hard to see how God is providing for us. To trust that God is providing what we *need* when it doesn’t look like what we *want.*

 But it is in walking with God that, eventually, we find rest.

 I can’t promise God won’t send a snake to bite you if you whine, but I ***can*** tell you that God’s love is greater, and God’s mercy is wider than we can possibly imagine.

 May we learn to better trust in God’s promises and find peace for our weary souls.