

Rev. Lynne Ogren
March 11, 2018

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
4th Sunday in Lent

Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

Let us pray. Grant us, O God, to hear your voice, and in hearing your voice to love your word, and in loving your word, to do your will through Christ our Lord. Amen

After a long winter with lots of snow we are all anxious, by now, for spring to come. And our warm temperatures this weekend and this coming week will help move us along to that season of planting and mowing and the freedom from jackets and boots.

Sometimes we can feel a similar anxiousness to get through the season of Lent. This is the 4th of 5 Sundays in Lent and here in the church office we are planning for Easter and the weeks following. One of the difficulties of working in the church is that we must always look ahead and we can easily fail to live in the present season.

But I suspect that's true for just about all of us. We have a hard time living in the moment, especially in this season that calls us to be reflective and repentant...things that are not very comfortable, especially for several weeks at a time.

The Israelites were feeling like that too in our covenant story today. It is just one of the stories in the book of Numbers in which they complain about their circumstances. This is a complaining people. On Wednesday we told the story of their escape from Egypt and they were complaining and wanting to go back even before they crossed the Red Sea!

The other instances when they complained had to do with food, water, meat, worrying about being invaded, and now they're back at it complaining about food and water again. But this time they complain not only against Moses, but against God, too.

Just like when we were kids on long car rides—long before we had electronic devices to keep us occupied—they were tired of travelling and just wanted to get to wherever God was taking them. And, by jingies, it had better be as good as Egypt was!

Right. Egypt, where they were slaves and worked night and day for an oppressive Pharaoh who killed many of their baby boys, and where they probably didn't have anything particularly good to eat or drink either.

In response to their complaining God sent serpents, poisonous snakes. Is this God's punishment for their complaining? Maybe. At least that's how the Israelites interpreted it.

It is still common to hear today that when bad things happen to people, it is God's response to something we have done. Some people say that God sends a natural disaster or illness or some other difficulty as a form of punishment for humanity's lack of faithfulness.

The fact is, the snakes probably already lived in the wilderness, just as we live in a world where extreme weather, disease, and human tragedies happen all the time. Does God send them as our punishments? Or are these events occasions that bring to our attention once again our need for God's salvation and mercy?

That is the reaction of the Israelites. They realize their complaint against God was a sinful and rebellious one. And when Moses speaks to God on their behalf, God gives him a strange instruction. “Make a bronze serpent, and sit it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.”

Just last Sunday we heard that “You shall not make for yourselves an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath...[and] You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I am the Lord your God.” Over time some people did come to worship this serpent on a pole. They even named it! But several generations after our story today, King Hezekiah realized that the serpent had taken on new meaning for the people and he destroyed it.

Initially though, when the people called out to God to save them God did not take away the snakes as they asked him to. God used a symbol that would turn their attention heavenward so that they would trust in God to heal them even as the snakes remained. God used a symbol of death to bring healing and new life.

This isn't a new move for God. Back in Egypt, the final plague was the sending of the angel of death to kill the first born of the Egyptians. The Israelites were told to kill a lamb or a goat for their final meal and to mark their doorways with its blood. This sign of death became a sign of life as the angel passed over the homes of the Israelites.

The church has a number of symbols and objects that are used in worship. We have candles, paraments, stained glass windows—and we have the cross.

Like the snake Moses made on the pole, we look to a symbol of death which serves as a symbol for new life. We display it high, just as the serpent on the stick was lifted up high, so that the cross leads our eyes and our hearts to God—the source of our salvation from sin and death.

The Israelites were moved to repentance, to admit their sin, and they needed a way to turn their hearts to God once again. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that the serpent on the pole was used like a sacrament, a way in which to encounter the grace of God.

Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the two sacraments we have today. In the water and the bread and wine, God comes to us bringing grace and forgiveness. We do not worship the water or the bread and wine as having power in and of themselves. It is God's word that makes the water of baptism holy, or sacred, and provides a means for God's grace and forgiveness to be given to us. The same is true for the elements of the Meal.

The Israelites did not have these holy practices yet. But God responded to their repentance by giving them something they could understand, a symbol that helped them receive the life God offered in the midst of the threats and death around them.

That is the theme of this Lenten season. It is a time of recognizing the ways we fall short of loving God and relying on God's grace and forgiveness. The Israelites were given the time in the wilderness to learn how to do that.

We all have our wilderness times, too, when we are forced to examine our lives honestly. Lent is a scheduled time to do that each year. But maybe you've experienced a kind of wilderness as you have lived through medical treatments and physical therapy. You have to focus on yourself and how you will live differently in the future.

For some, their wilderness might be a time of separation from others, whether it's estrangement from a family member, a time in prison, or a time of unemployment. Even grief can be that wilderness time, when we feel abandoned and we just want things to be like they were before.

God does not give us separate symbols for each of these wilderness seasons. God has given us one symbol—the cross. On the cross Jesus was lifted up, bearing the weight of our sins. As we look to the cross of Christ we see the love God has for the whole world, a love that has the power to save us from the sin that attacks us, the power to heal our broken hearts, the power to bring new life out of death.

Repenting of our sins is not easy, but it opens our hearts to receive the love and grace of God we know through the death and resurrection of Jesus. As we look to the cross we recall the covenant God makes with us through Holy Baptism and we are refreshed and renewed to live in ways that shine that light of God's love to the world. Repent and believe in this good news for you.

Thanks be to God! Amen