

Rev. Lynne Ogren Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
March 14, 2021 4th Sunday in Lent
Number 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Show us your ways, O Lord, and lead us in your truth. Amen

I have been known to say that I'm good at whining because whining works! It's like the old saying about the squeaky wheel that gets the grease. Kids are pros at whining and complaining and if they get the response they want—whether that's attention or a treat at the grocery store—they'll try it again and again, even into adulthood.

The Israelites were great whiners and complainers. Shortly after they entered the wilderness after crossing the Red Sea from slavery into freedom, they complained about being hungry—so God gave them manna every morning. And a few chapters later flocks of quail started showing up every evening. A while later, they whined about being thirsty—so God told Moses to strike a rock with his staff and fresh water came from the rock.

In today's scripture from Numbers, we figure they are about 38 years into their 40-year trek through the wilderness. And they start whining again. Even all these years later, the Israelites say they want to go back to Egypt—somehow forgetting the harsh treatment they received from the Egyptians, somehow forgetting that they worked every single day without a day off, somehow forgetting all that God did to get them out of there.

In this act of complaining, the Israelites broke their commitment to the covenant God renewed with them after they entered the wilderness. They were no longer trusting God to provide for them. Instead, they were complaining against God and Moses. At this point the whining quits working.

We've all done our share of whining this past year. We have whined about wearing masks and washing hands and having our temperature taken so many places. We have whined about postponing weddings and funerals and travel plans. We have whined about reduced seating in restaurants and even here at church. We want to go back to the way things were before.

Now, we weren't oppressed like the enslaved Israelites were in Egypt, but are there some things we have learned and changed in the past year that are worth keeping? What have been some blessings or unexpected surprises that have come up for you this year?

Here are few I've heard people talk about. We've learned to make better eye contact because with masks on it's the only way to read our facial expressions. Some of us have become more comfortable with technology—and because of that we have connected with people we hadn't reached out to for a long time, family and friends.

Some people have cleaned out closets, taken up new hobbies, or become more skilled at baking or cooking because they've had more time at home. And families have played more games together, taken more long drives, and have reconnected in ways that their busy schedules used to prevent.

In our Old Testament reading today, God sent a punishment to the people for their complaining, in the form of poisonous serpents. In my study on this text this week I learned that both Jewish and Christian scholars struggle with this passage. None of them understand God as being a punishing God.

Sometimes bad things happen as a logical consequence of human behavior. Natural disasters strike as a result atmospheric phenomenon. Accidents happen. And all of these scholars and I agree that God enters into these troubles, but is not the source of them. I do not believe that God brought this COVID-19 pandemic upon the world.

But how might God be at work in the midst of our struggles—and our complaining—to bring about healing and wholeness?

The truth is, we will only recognize God's presence and blessings when we return to God—which is the theme of the Lenten season. The Psalm reminds us to give our thanks and praise to God, and we can only do that by looking for God's power at work in the world around us.

Paul reminds us that we are saved from our enslavement to sin which kept us from living in the covenant God made with us in Holy Baptism. It is God's great love and mercy that saves us from a dead-end life and makes us alive by the power of Christ's resurrection. This is God's gift to us—bringing us back into covenant relationship even when we turn away from it.

The day is almost here when we remember again how Jesus was lifted up—on the cross, and in his resurrection, and in his ascension into heaven. We continue to lift him up today in our praise and thanksgivings for the grace and life we receive from God through Christ day after day.

Living a life based on praise and giving thanks to God leaves little room for whining and complaining. Sometimes we need to do that—to face what is difficult in our lives.

I went to the doctor for a check up this week and she asked me how I was holding up with the struggles this past year. I said, "Well, I know a lot of people who had things harder than I have." And the doctor replied, "Your struggles are still valid."

It is healthy to face the struggles in our lives. Rather like the Israelites who had to look at a snake on a pole—to face what was bringing them pain. And in facing their pain they were to look to God to save them.

As we face our own struggles, we remember that we have a God who knows our pain because Jesus became one of us. In him we see God's commitment to us and God's power to bring forth life and healing out of death and pain.

When we are in the darkness of our struggles it is hard to give thanks. It is hard to see God at work to bring forth life and light. It is then that we rely on our faith community to surround us, to pray and give thanks on our behalf.

Our individual faith and trust in God can sometimes ebb and flow like the tide. But we have our Lord who is good, whose steadfast love and mercy endures forever and remains faithful to us, giving us one another to support us faith when our faith feels weak.

In Christian community, let us lift Christ up in praise and thanksgiving for bringing light into our darkness, hope in our despair, and life in the face of death—today and into eternity.

Thanks be to God. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Relying on the promises of God, we pray boldly for the church, the world, and all in need.

A brief silence.

Steadfast God, you sent your Son that the world might be saved through him. Inspire the witness of the church throughout the world. Empower missionaries, Bible translators, and ministries of service in your name. Bless our partners in ministry, especially Intermountain children's ministry. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Creator God, from east to west your steadfast love is shown. Nourish seas and deserts, wilderness areas and cities. Give water to thirsty lands; nurture spring growth that feeds hungry creatures; bless farmers as they prepare for the growing season. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Faithful God, you sustained your people in the wilderness. Give courage to all who lead in times of crisis and scarce resources. Prosper the work of those who aid victims of famine and drought especially Lutheran Disaster Response. Bring peace in places where scarce resources cause violence. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Comforting God, your mercy endures forever. Deliver all who cry to you, especially those who are hungry or without homes. Give life in places where death seems triumphant; give healing to those who are sick and comfort to those who mourn, especially those listed in our bulletin and those we name in our hearts.

Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of hope, by grace we have been saved. Fill this congregation to overflowing with that grace, as we show mercy to others. Nourish any in our midst who are hungry, especially children, and bless our ministries of feeding and shelter, especially SMILES and the Love INC Personal Care Closet. Give us patience and courage when the way seems long.

Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of life, your Son was lifted up that whoever believes might have eternal life. We praise you for all who have died in Christ, especially Randy Simpson. Bring us with all the saints into the fullness of your promises. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

We entrust ourselves and all our prayers to you, O faithful God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.