

## **For Healing of the Nations**

Menno Mennonite Church  
March 10, 2024

**Purpose:** To recall God's work of grace to all people.

**Message:** God reaches out to heal that which ails us come what may.

**Scripture:** Numbers 21:4-9 (I will read); John 3:1-17 (please read)

**Synopsis:** There are times that we like the people of Israel of old find ourselves on a journey that stops making sense for us and where we are going. We call out to God, condemning the circumstances of life and faith that place us in difficult positions, areas of dryness in our journey of discipleship. We find ourselves in the wilderness and we long to see salvation. In these times we are visited with a call to look again to the eyes of faith, and the reason of why we do the things we do, looking again to the message of the gospel to enliven us, sustaining us to walk on through the draught of hard times. We do what we do as a response to our understanding of the Gospel, inspired by the sustaining love of God to spur us on.

**Numbers 21:4-9** <sup>4</sup>

They traveled from Mount Hor  
along the route to the Red Sea,  
to go around Edom.  
But the people grew impatient on the way;  
<sup>5</sup> they spoke against YHWH  
and against Moses, and said,

"Why have you brought us  
up out of Egypt to die in the desert?  
There is no bread!  
There is no water!  
And we detest this miserable food!"

<sup>6</sup> Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them;  
they bit the people  
and many Israelites died.

<sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said,  
"We sinned when we spoke  
against YHWH and against you.  
Pray that YHWH will take the snakes away from us."

So Moses prayed for the people.

<sup>8</sup> YHWH said to Moses,  
"Make a snake  
and put it up on a pole;  
anyone who is bitten can look at it  
and live."

<sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze snake  
and put it up on a pole.

Then when anyone was bitten by a snake  
and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

At times we can struggle to connect to the trials and travails of the Old Testament and the workings of the people we find there. The culture and context and so well desperate from ours. We, thanks to considerable luck and good fortune, have not known the privations that seem so common. We have not been exploited for our labor. We have not needed to run for our very lives or to turn to supernatural gifting in order to be fed. We have not been required to wonder in the wilderness carrying that which was ours on our backs for any more time that we might have done so for recreation, let alone for forty years in isolation. The distance between us and them can seem vastly different.

Yet, somehow it does all make sense. The people of Israel had been freed from Egypt, rescued from plagues and by the parting of the Red Sea. But once they have crossed the sea, seen the water close over their enemies, have had time to party and give thanks to God for a little while we can almost hear the silence wondering when the quiet part get said out loud: Ummm... I'm hungry? What's next? How is this going to work? God's salvation was at hand, they had been delivered, but their question was what's for dinner. And so it goes for the next 40 odd years: "Everything is terrible! This is impossible! This is the worst thing that has ever happened to us! I just want to go home!" becomes the refrain. The Old Testament is filled with a narrative motif that goes like this: The people complain. God provides a punishment, a wake-up call, if you will. The people confess their sin and their need. Moses intercedes for them and they are saved. It's happened so many times by this point in the book of Numbers that the writer just sails through the details like "y'all know how this goes." This story, the seventh of the "murmuring" stories of Numbers is just the latest of the cycles to go through. We know they are on the scenic route home and that they will in fact get there, albeit the round about way. We see this cycle and know it well.

But if we think about it a little bit and remove ourselves from the particulars of the story, we can find our own ways to locate ourselves within the telling. We can appreciate the impulse of complaint and despair somewhat when we consider how we sometimes encounter the world. It is easy to get caught up in the world as it is: the bad news, the petty arguments, the competitive outrage that we allow to pass as civilized conversation. It is easy to find ourselves at the narrow end of a long tube losing perspective. We worry about failing relationships, safety for our families and communities and what might be next. We live in a condition Umber all the time (remember the color-coded terrorism conditions we normalized 20 years ago or so)? We easily

find ourselves searching for the next big thing, waiting to be bitten, finding ourselves praying in big and small ways “take these snakes away”.

But here is the thing. It hadn't occurred to me until this time. This is a rather famous lectionary reading notable for its rather peculiar story of salvation, so much so that many seasoned preachers know it well. When we were beginning to think through the service earlier this week Emily asked what the theme was and I responded “It's snake a stick week” and she knew what I was talking about. We speak of this as a story of salvation and it is, but it is a salvation of a rather different aspect, I think, than what they had been expecting. Moses intercedes for the people and God offers salvation and healing but does not take away the snakes. Which would seem the more obvious thing to do after all: when you have a rodent problem you introduce cats, traps, and all the rest to take away the issue. Wouldn't it make more sense for God to make the snakes away, or make them less bity or something?

Instead we are given a solution of an image (which, given Israel's history seems a bit risky) which when glimpsed would allow those who have been bitten to live and be healed. When you think about it there might be something to this, really. Israel seems pretty ready to forget about the ready fixes that they had been given to the various problems. Witness here their willingness to return to Egypt and be fed then to continue to endure the various problems that come with freedom in the wilderness. When they are in the moment, anything is better than what they have, and they are willing to do just about anything. Here the solution is “anyone who is bitten can look and live.” And sure enough that is exactly how it worked. Maybe people are less likely to forget that God is in the snake healing business if they need to rely on that business every day?

Sometimes what we need most is to remember where to look. My favorite week of the year during High School was Spring Break. Not only was it spring and we could get away from the daily grind of the classroom, but this was the week that I had worked toward the whole year long. It was Geology club week. A teacher and sponsor would load up 2 vans and drive them by themselves through the night the Monday of break to take the dozen or so kids who had worked for the trip for a week of hiking in the Eastern national parks of Great Smoky and Shenandoah. We would have 5 days of hiking and walking, with a 15-20 minute trailside lecture along the trailside to point out the details of what we were seeing. It was great fun, and once I went, I knew it was never to be missed. We were left pretty much to our own devices needing only to

stay to the trail close enough to hear the patented holler of our leader (audible for a good way I can tell you), and had the freedom to roam in the evenings at the hotel. In retrospect it was a rather amazing bit of liability that I am guessing might never come to be today, at least if anyone bothered to talk to an insurance agent first.

Of course this was not always smooth sailing. No amount of pre-trip training could fully prepare you for 10 miles a day on soft feet. Being spring and all things remained rather unpredictable. One time we were well into one of our longer hikes for the week when an unforeseen whiteout snowstorm blew up and dropped 6 inches of wet snow on our heads turning our higher-altitude hike into a slog. Being slowed down and set on with weather, we quickly found ourselves profoundly miserable, wet and cold. Things didn't improve when night set in. We were day hiking in the East. No one was packing any gear that could come close to providing overnight accommodation, let alone a flashlight (no kids; we hadn't even heard of cell phones). Of course, the only way to make it out was to continue forward, no matter what. I still remember being with a group feeling our way down the trail, I often needing to proceed on hands and knees to place the feet of one of my companions down the rocks one by one. She could not, would not move any other way. Unless she was focusing on me and what we were doing, she was utterly paralyzed to even move. Everything else was just too big to think about. We all made it out around 10 PM. rarely has McDonalds tasted quite so good.

Where we focus matters. When we find ourselves in the wilderness, in the moment of discomfort and pain, our native impulse is to narrow our focus to what matters the most. It is natural and necessary: we need to concentrate on the task at hand lest things get even worse. But what that impulse deprives us of is a sense of the broader picture all around us. Out in the dark woods wet and cold we think about being primarily wet and cold and not that we are in the wonders of creation. Lost in the non-stop noise of our heart breaking world it is so easy to forget that within it all we hold a power that is beyond that which is of today, here and now that can and will save us when we find the moment of perspective to look upon it. Jesus compares himself to the instrument of healing in John precisely because that is the nature of the salvation he was bringing to all of humanity. He comes not to vanquish the snakes—not yet in any case. Jesus comes to declare that even the worst of the bites has lost its sting, that there is no place that we can be, no circumstance that we can endure in which God is not already and presently at work. We just need the where withal to look upon it. The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ is for

the healing of the nations. It is a one time event but its consequence is required to be applied daily as we live out its certainty of hope and its promise of a kingdom yet coming. When we are in the worst of the wilderness, we are invited to lift our eyes and look on the one who leads us forth, who heals us as we are for where we are, not that we might escape what is, but that we might be given the perspective that there is something beyond what feels so persistently and permanently enthralling now.

Does this mean that all we need do is to replace our vision of the world for the vision of the Christ and the Cross? No; we dare not do that. We dare not turn away from the world as it is for what it is. To do so is to remove ourselves from the present, to deny the suffering of others, and to bend a Christian worldview into blinders that would deny the realities as they are. We cannot do that because as we are so ready to profess God so loves the world—warts and all—that he gave his only son that it might be saved, that it might be reshaped in love as it is for what it is. Christ offers us a perspective that helps us move into the world as it is knowing always that this is not the world as it shall be, or is destined to become. That is the perspective that we must retain. That is the view of salvation that we must so desperately cling to every time we turn our eyes to Christ and the cross.

People of God wondering in the wilderness complaining about all that is happening to them, thinking that the end has come: raise your eyes and see.

People of God, marinated in news and noise, buffeted by your social media feed; finding the problems of life all consuming. When we struggle to put things into perspective and remember that we walk with our very healer, if we can but lift our eyes to see.  
Amen.