

## Wondering

We heard in the first reading that “They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom.” If you are like me, you may not be well studied in ancient middle eastern geography and you may not realize the significance of the Israelites path. At this point, the Israelites had been traveling for some 40 years. Sometimes on their journey the Lord directed them to go directly through lands on their path. In this case, the Lord directed them to go around Edom. This path took them to the Ambah which, in the travel brochure, is described as a stony, sandy, almost barren plain with mountain walls on either side. To make it even better, it has sand storms. It was not only the heat, drought and sand which depressed them, but the fact that they were now headed directly away from Canaan. They had been traveling, escaping slavery in Egypt for around 40 years. For me, that would be equivalent to leaving Egypt when I was 12 and I would still be in this desert. Traveling, wondering, not always knowing where we would go next. Knowing we were supposed to reach some promised land of milk and honey but feeling like it would never come. Sure, some miraculous things happened along the way, but those have faded from memory when times got difficult. Sometimes it would seem like we didn’t have enough food or water. Most of the time we would eat the same bread from heaven. The Israelites became frustrated and mad. They complained against their leader, Moses, and they complained against God. This is not the first time the Israelites complained. They complained about being thirsty, they complained about being hungry, they complained about the difficult journey. This story is the 14th time we have record of them complaining.

So, what does God do this time when they complain? We’ll get to that, but this reminded me of an incident that happened to me some 25 years ago. Greta and I had been married for 3 or 4 years. We didn’t have kids yet. It was probably a Saturday and I had had a headache for much of the day. It was a bad one. I am sure I had been complaining about it throughout the day. In the afternoon I walked into the kitchen where Greta was and complained about how bad my head hurt. She turned, and with great compassion in her eyes came up to me and promptly stomped on my foot. Wham! She said, “So, your head doesn’t hurt so bad now does it?” I think maybe she had had enough of my complaining.

Well this isn’t exactly what God did and I am sure He had more clear motives and a better plan in mind. But, as odd as it sounds to us, He sends venomous snakes among the people. The snakes bite the people and many die. This seems like a very strange response from God. I read one commentator who said “God finally gives them a taste of their own hateful medicine. They experienced the same painful poison they were dishing out.” The people quickly recognize their sin and its consequences and plead to Moses to pray to God to take away the snakes. God responds to the pleas and prayer but not exactly the way they asked. He instructs Moses to make a bronze serpent and to mount it on a pole. Then anyone that is bitten by a snake can come and look up to the serpent hung on the pole and he or she will be saved from death from the venom. God did not take away the snakes as they asked. The result of their complaining, the result of their sinning, is still there. But what God did was provide a means for each person

to receive healing only through an act of faith, by looking up to the serpent. An early Jewish writer says that it was not the serpent that brought the Israelites healing, but the fact that they 'lifted up their eyes and directed their heart towards their heavenly Father.' They had to humble themselves and put their faith in God, the only giver of life. I suspect the people couldn't see it at the time and I am not sure if we can even understand it now but God had a plan and He knew He needed to break the will of the people to allow them to realize they were totally dependent upon His grace and mercy for their life. God didn't eradicate the serpents, but, He provided the people salvation from the effect of a deadly bite. They were still in the desert. They still faced the snakes but those that yielded to God were saved.

The bronze serpent is mentioned two more times in scripture. The historical record is a little vague but it's believed that the Israelites carried the serpent with them into the promised land. It was placed in the temple and for many years and maybe generations served as a reminder of their need to look to God for their salvation. Over time the Jews lost sight of the true meaning of the serpent. They no longer saw it as pointing them to God, but began to worship the bronze figure itself. I may be breaking some preaching rule about using more than one personal story in a sermon but I'll do it anyway. Up until about a year before we moved to Germany we had a dog named Riley. Riley was a golden retriever. A wonderful, loving dog. Like most dogs Riley loved to chase squirrels. When we were out walking in the park I would point to a squirrel and say "Riley, look! a squirrel!" He'd get all excited and look right at my finger. No matter what I would do, he would just look at my finger never seeing the squirrel. This is similar to what happened to the Jews with the serpent. They no longer saw the figure on the pole pointing them to God but were focused solely on the bronze serpent. They worshiped it as if it contained the power of healing. We read in 2 Kings that Hezekiah realized the error of their ways and in the cleansing of the temple the serpent which was now an idol was destroyed.

The third mention of the serpent mounted on a pole comes to us in our Gospel reading from John, chapter 3. There is a lot packed into this one chapter. In verses 1 – 13 we learn about the Pharisee, Nicodemus coming in the night to question Jesus about the source of his wisdom and power. Instead of directly answering the question, Jesus responds by telling Nicodemus about the need to be born again. To say the least, Nicodemus is confused. In response to Nicodemus' second "How can this be?" question, Jesus says "I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him". And then, immediately after Jesus' foretelling of his crucifixion, John gives us the well-known verses starting with; "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

This interaction with Nicodemus occurred very early in Jesus' ministry. The only recorded miracle in John prior to this story is Jesus turning the water into wine. There is a mention of signs he was performing but all the other miracles we know about are yet to come. So very

early on Jesus attracted the attention of the ruling elite and they wanted to know what he was up to. To better understand the reason for Nicodemus' question we need to consider what is happening around Jesus in the places he traveled and preached. The Roman's had conquered much of the known world decades earlier and were an occupying force in Judea. In an effort to control the Jews and put down the growing rebellion, the Romans had appointed Herod as "King of the Jews". The people were angry. They protested, sometimes violently, against the Romans and against the taxes and against the tyranny. They prayed to God to send a savior that would lead the battle against the invaders and drive them out. They were frustrated and wanted God to get rid of the infestation. Nicodemus may have been wondering if Jesus was an answer to these prayers.

In a few weeks we will celebrate Easter. We'll hear the Hosannas on Palm Sunday and maybe even shout them ourselves. But remember just days after the 1<sup>st</sup> hosannas were shouted for Jesus, a similar crowd shouted, "Crucify Him!". They were mad, they were frustrated. They may have heard Jesus' words or even may have seen his miracles but their anger had boiled over and someone had to pay. And pay He did.

Let's go back to Jesus' words in the Gospel of John, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him". We know, the first lifting up of the Son of Man was not a glorious, conquering, lifting up but like the bronze serpent, Christ was mounted on the top of a pole. Sacrificed, for us to look up to and be saved. God did not rid the Jews of the infestation but provided more than they asked for. He provided the conqueror of death. The one that wipes clean all sin.

Are we at times like the Israelites in the desert? Frustrated with the journey we are on? Angry that we've gone so far and now we even seem to be going in the wrong direction. Angry at God for not making our journey easier. Are we sometimes like the Jews in Jesus' day, angry about the oppression and wanting God to drive it out? It is OK to admit this. This time of Lent is a time for us to reflect. To see in ourselves the same things we see in these stories of the people in the Bible. In this time of Lent when we prepare ourselves for the glorious Easter, we can accept that we have at times turned against our God, been bitten by the serpents of our world and are in need of a cure.

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." Just as the Israelites were healed immediately upon looking up to the snake on the staff, when we give up ourselves and look to our savior, through God's great mercy and love, we are given eternal life. Not just eternal life at some later time but eternal life right here and right now. Just like the Israelites in the desert and just like the early followers of Jesus, we still have a journey that may at times be difficult but that is all part of God's plan. Jesus, on His cross, points us to His Father and our Father. The creator of all life who so loved the world, and so loved you, that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.