

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Fourth Sunday of Lent: March 10, 2024

Looking in the Right Place

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on this fourth Sunday of Lent. I do have to comment that today's Old Testament scripture (which is repeated in a way in our Gospel) is a story with immense meaning. It says a lot about who and where we are on our journey of faith, when we consider God's interventions within our lives.

Presented in our Old Testament reading is the struggle of the Israelite people. Trudging through the seemingly never-ending wilderness, with nothing to eat or drink but miserable manna, the people speak against God and Moses. There is no water, and the manna which God has provided for them is, as the people say, "miserable." Earlier the people looked back with rose-colored glasses at the abundant foods they left behind in Egypt: fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, garlic. Now they're stuck with food that tastes like "cakes baked with oil" and they have had enough. The people may sound like spoiled children, but their complaints are not light. They have been in the wilderness of Kadesh for 40 years and they don't seem to have made much progress.

This seems to be the experience of every generation. Whether you experienced the plagues of old, the Covid pandemic, or some other variation of trauma that may come your way, we often wonder why God doesn't prevent it from happening in the first place. It seems that by design the human race needs its struggles to appreciate the blessings given to it.

And how does God respond to these complaints for help? By afflicting them with venomous snakes. The people beg Moses to intercede, and he does. Then God, rather

than removing the snakes, sends a cure for snakebites. In other words, they'll still get bitten. That danger doesn't go away, although God does offer healing if they look in the right direction.

For those complaining to Moses, the life of captivity seemed to hold a better lifestyle, which we know, of course, is a myth. When the Israelites were in captivity, they complained about that; now they are free and they are again not happy. "Ungrateful people", we can easily say. Or can we? Isn't this the human condition? The saying that the grass is always greener on the other side. Or we try to solve the problem by staying with the "devil we know" rather than change.

I imagine that God takes a huge every time humanity gets itself into a no-win situation with the amazing free will he has given us. Yet, in his mercy, God doesn't take away the struggle, but he does offer a cure and relief.

Metaphorically speaking, the serpent of Eve, the evil one (the one that represents our own desire to have God-like power and knowledge) has bitten humanity again. This time it is in Jesus' era and the only cure is facing that evil. They say this is true in almost every case of human ascension. We need to face our deepest and darkest shadows, to find the solution and the cure to our own struggles, usually with our own unmentioned demons.

But that's not all of it; there is another harsh reality that the text holds up for our attention. What's happening in this passage is that the exodus generation is being weeded out and replaced by a new generation. The book of Numbers is coming to terms with the fact that the old generation will not see God's promises come to fruition. On this long, dangerous journey, some simply will not reach the destination.

Many of the Israelites are killed by the snakes, and the people repent and plead with Moses to intercede on their behalf. Moses does intercede, and God instructs him to make a serpent of bronze and put it on a pole; all who look at the bronze snake are healed. Remember, though, that even those who are healed will not live to reach Canaan.

In the midst of their desperation at a journey even more arduous than they ever would have imagined, how did they go on? How would we, how *do* we, go on when faced with a similar circumstance? What do we do when something for which we have hoped and prayed and labored recedes farther and farther into the distance? If someone never reaches the financial security he or she has worked so hard for; if another is never able to heal a relationship that is long broken; if I never quite become the person I've imagined myself to be — what then?

Even in our worst failures and disappointments, God provides. God offers healing for our wounds, relationship for our loneliness, and faithfulness for our faithlessness. God doesn't remove the sources of our suffering, but God makes the journey with us, providing what we most deeply need, if we but look in the right direction.

So we come to the time of Jesus, and we understand Jesus knows this story, probably since childhood. We are coming close to the time when those in charge of the Temple, those who are supposed to lead others to a closer relationship with God, like the snake, will strike the people including the disciples.

The serpent (the sins of humanity of greed, power, lust, the vanities of old) will rear its ugly head soon during Holy Week. Jesus will be tempted, but not sin. Jesus will be held in the eye of the snake so to speak, and put up with the bites. However, in the long run he will become the cure for humanities' ills.

During Holy Week, to stare at Jesus on the cross, bruised and beaten, is to see ourselves bruised and beaten by the world which is still in so much distress - full of so much inhumanity, so much sin. To hear the very people Jesus came to save mock him, as those in our Old Testament reading complained to Moses and mocked God, is to know each generation has its struggles.

But through the lifting of Jesus on that cross, just as those facing the serpent are facing their darkest side, we see our sins being bared by one of our own. And yes, many, if not all of us here will not yet see Jesus return. But just as the generations before us, we will not yet see the world redeemed, but we will go on. How? By looking in the right direction.

So as our Lenten tradition goes, here are your questions for this week. What lurks on your darker side? With faith can you face it knowing that is the cure? How does the journey of the passion and Jesus' suffering represent God's love to you and therefore change you? And lastly, if you have been redeemed by your faith, are you living into the peace brought by that faith and truth?

Welcome to Lent, week four. Amen