

Lifting Up the Gift

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

4th Sunday in Lent - March 14, 2021

Texts: Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:8-10; John 3:14-21

Numbers 21:4-9

On their 40-year journey from Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan, the formerly enslaved Hebrew people found plenty to aggravate them. This strange story invites us into the mystery of the relationship between complaint and consequences, repentance and restoration, and God's part in both. It begs the question: how do humans influence God?

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Ephesians 2:1-10

The writer of this letter sees humankind as dead in spirit until sin is recognized and the tasks of repentance and restoration begun. Most important, though: we don't initiate our own spiritual resurrection. This is God's gift:

By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what the Creator has made us, formed in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

John 3:14-21

Jesus' act of civil disobedience in the Temple drew the attention of a Jewish leader named Nicodemus, who approached him secretly for answers. This is part of Jesus' response, and contains one of the best-known passages in the Bible. Here, I switched a word. Does it change the meaning?

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever trusts in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who trusts in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who trust in him are not condemned; but those who do not trust are condemned already, because they have not trusted in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Did you notice the word I changed? Did the change make a difference in how you heard the text? What's the difference between belief and trust? Well, let me tell you a story.

My companion and I were biking through France. We bought our bicycles in Paris and they were different from American ones; they had tubular tires, with an outer tire sewn around an inner tube and glued onto the rim. And flats were a pain to fix - unglue, unstitch, find puncture, patch hole, restitch, reglue. I know. I had a flat. And we didn't fix it very well because a few miles down the road, I noticed a bulge. I yelled at my companion, ahead of me. (He had the repair kit.) He pretended not to hear me. The bulge became a bubble popping out. I yelled again. "Don't think about it!" he yelled back. The bubble became a balloon, the inner tube blossoming out of the side of the tire. "This is bad," I yelled. "Don't look at it," he shouted back. "Just ignore it." Good grief. I stopped by the side of the road, grumbling and blaming him. Whose idea was this bicycle trip anyway? Not mine, that's for sure, blah, blah. It was a clear case of disbelief and denial vs. distrust and aggravation. He circled back, saw for himself, and fixed it. We rode on.

The Israelites in the wilderness believed in God. They didn't doubt God's existence. But they didn't trust God to take care of them. Can you blame them? The future was unknown and the present...uncomfortable. In today's text, they complain again and we get this scary story of God sending poisonous snakes that bit and killed them. Is God really that mean? Maybe it's like this. The people nursed a spirit of bitterness and blame that festered in them. Then God kind of turned them inside out. The poisonous snakes were the outward, physical equivalent of their poisonous thoughts and words. When they saw for themselves that their lack of trust was killing them, they repented. Moses interceded once again, and God told him to make a serpent of bronze and set it on a pole for everyone to see. The people looked up and lived. The menace became a gift.

Seeing what was killing them healed them. But it's such a weird story that we probably would never hear it if Jesus hadn't mentioned it to Nicodemus. Remember him? He's the Jewish teacher who came to Jesus by night. Why by night? In the dark, he's anonymous. Maybe he's ashamed of his interest in Jesus, or maybe he feels guilty, like he's betraying his friends. Jesus says the famous words about "God so loved the world," but the story doesn't end there. Jesus goes on, "For God didn't send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." And then Jesus launches into this bit about darkness and light. We don't usually dwell on that part: it sounds judgmental and God knows we don't like to be judged. Which is funny, because we are so good at it ourselves! Human judgment pushes people into dark places, prisons not of God's making. And it's hard to break out of those.

There's a delightful young woman in my pastors' study group. She's an intern, doing her on-the-job-training before ordination. She's smart and sensitive and loves God with all her heart. I know she'll be a wonderful pastor. She told us that she started seminary the same summer that she came out as bisexual. I wanted to weep. When I started seminary, which was before she was even born, if you were gay or trans or bi and heard God's call to be a pastor, you had to be so

deep in the closet no daylight ever penetrated. You had to really trust someone before telling them. If you told the wrong person, the consequences could be damning. A dearly loved faculty member was fired when their same-sex relationship was revealed. A senior who'd survived four hard years pretending to be straight was exposed and expelled overnight.

Fifteen years later, my congregation baptized the adopted child of a gay couple, and welcomed an gay man as their intern pastor. Yes, we lost some members, but many more searched their souls and trusted God's guidance. A few years after that, the ELCA, my Lutheran denomination, approved same-sex marriages, paving the way for gay pastors to be open about their relationships. The ELCA lost members over that decision. The issue of sexuality still divides Christians around the world. This grieves me. But the reason I wanted to weep is that my friend claimed her own true self at the same time that she claimed her call to lead others in faith; she trusted God to work out the details. In one generation, so much darkness dispelled, so much goodness brought to light. Not without struggle and pain and division.

Society's judgment, not God's, locks people in prisons. Often people internalize that judgment, essentially holding the keys to their own jail. I've seen it not just in LGBTQ folks but in people of color, in women drawn to male-dominated careers, in differently abled people. Maybe you have, too. No matter how much you believe in yourself, it takes enormous courage and deep trust in God to break out of the box. The Israelites' problem was not a failure to believe but a failure to trust. But God had bigger plans for them than they had for themselves. Their error was wanting to slide back into the box and pull the lid down. Sometimes jail feels safer than freedom. Sometimes living in the darkness of denial feels easier than seeing the light and facing the truth.

All of us can believe lies, even about ourselves: we might even think that if others knew the truth about us we'd be doomed. I might believe in God, but still think God wants nothing to do with the likes of me. What a sad place to live. And what a lie. But human beings have always believed lies, and still do: that the earth is flat, that sickness is God's punishment, that humans are the only species that matters. Lies are toxic, living inside us like poisonous snakes. They need to be lifted out of darkness, brought to light, exposed for what they are before we can be freed and healed from them. You can't fix what you refuse to see - like the flat tire on my French bike.

Remember Nicodemus, the night visitor? He shows up twice more, both times in broad daylight. When his colleagues want to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus protests: "Wait a minute! Our own laws say we can't convict anyone without a trial." He's wavering. The third time is after Jesus' crucifixion. Nicodemus takes the risk of openly preparing Jesus' body for burial, as only one who loved and trusted him might do. He has stepped out of the shadows into the light. He listened, and he grew, and he changed. Like Nicodemus and the Israelites, our understanding can change. Beliefs do alter as we get new information. But we can't fix what we're afraid to look at. Trust helps us look at truth and not look away.

I know another woman, not so young as my pastor friend. She has cerebral palsy. Her walking is laborious and looks painful, her speech is slow and sometimes hard to understand. All her life, people expected her to be mentally slow as well, but there's nothing wrong with her brain. They - we, our culture - kept putting her in boxes. She kept busting out of them. She made wonderful art, wrote at least one book, and finally followed God's leading to seminary. She was ordained in her 50s and served a congregation until the CP limited her too much. She introduced me to this song; maybe you've heard it:

How could anyone ever tell you you were anything less than beautiful?
How could anyone ever tell you you were less than whole?
How could anyone fail to notice that your loving is a miracle?
How deeply you're connected to my soul.¹

God so loved *the world - all of it*. Jesus came not to condemn but to save. Moses lifted up the serpent, and Jesus was lifted up on the cross. Both are God's gifts of healing: "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For *you are what the Creator has made you*, formed in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be your way of life." Amen. TBTG

Prayers

Almighty God, you know all hearts and all desires. You know when we distrust you and when we distrust ourselves, when we disbelieve the evidence of our senses, and when we judge others on the basis of lies we've swallowed. Trust doesn't come easily. Teach us to live as though we know you are with us and will never let us down.

Teach us to be reliable witnesses to your truth, willing to learn and change, seeing all your children as you do - full of potential. Help us to remember that we only come to faith by your gift; help us to lift up your name and not our own fame.

We pray for those who suffer in prisons of society's judgment, unable to live out their full calling: for those who are denied full access to the world's goods; for those who suffer the put downs and cruelty of others. As Jesus sought and healed those crushed by his society, may we seek and heal those in our own.

May our compassion flow like yours for people near and far: for those already named, for those who come to this city for healing, for those who are dear to us. We ask this in Jesus' name and pray as he taught us, Our Father...

¹ *Words and music by Libby Roderick*. You can listen to a recording here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gITHQxIuE4>