

## LENT IV, 2018

### Numbers 21.4-9

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This Lent the Old Testament readings have focused on the theme of covenant. The first was God's covenant with the world in the time of Noah. Then came the covenant God made with Abraham, through whom all the peoples of the world would be blessed. Last week was the Sinai covenant, in which God made His people a kingdom of priests, a holy nation to serve His purposes. Next Sunday will be the new covenant God promises to make with His people, prophesied by Jeremiah. All of this leads up to the Last Supper of our Lord, when Jesus establishes the new covenant by the gift of His own life to conquer sin, evil, and death.

It would have seemed right to have this Sunday the story of God's covenant with David, in which God promised that there would always be a descendant of David to rule over God's people. That promise, Christians believe, is fulfilled in Jesus.

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But today, however, is a break in the action, so to speak. Today's reading does not focus on one of God's covenants, but an episode from the Jews journey to the Promised Land after the making of the covenant at Sinai. As such, this story from the Book of Numbers is paradigmatic for our own journey in faith today.

As the story opens, we find the Jews somewhere in the Sinai Peninsula. It is a desolate, barren place. It reminds me of US Route 50, which runs through the middle of Nevada. It is called "the loneliest road in America," because when you are on it you are in the middle of nothing. Towns are few and far apart. It is mostly scrub brush desert. Every few miles you find the remains of one of the stops of the old Pony Express mail system. But mostly, there is just a lot of nothing. I've thought, if a country tried to invade and conquer us, they would get to the middle of Nevada and turn back, saying, "Who would ever want this?"

So that's where the Jews were in the Sinai. Wandering in the middle of a whole lot of nothing. The people began to complain about the journey. "Are we there yet?" "This food stinks." A "Back-to-Egypt" committee had formed, advocating cut-

ting the whole trip off and turning back. At least in Egypt, they said, we had three hots and a cot, even if we were slaves.

How easy it is for people to give up their freedom. One of the first books in psychology I read was Erich Fromm's *Escape From freedom*. It grew out of his experience of living during the Nazi era in Germany. In times of high anxiety, From noted, people attempt to solve their fears and anxieties by one of three responses:

- Authoritarianism: people turn to a leader who projects power and promises security and release from their fears.
- Anarchy: People self-destruct, thinking that by destroying something, their anxious fears will go away. But since human beings cannot stand chaos for any length of time, anarchy usually results in a turn to authoritarian control.
- Conformity: People give up their own identity and responsibility by identifying with something in their society: a movement, a person, etc. The thinking is that if we can become a part of a group in which we are all the same, we will solve our fears. This, too, usually results in caving in to an authoritarian leader or group.

All of these responses do not solve our anxieties, but merely suppress them or turn them over to someone we think will solve them for us. All of them are escapes from genuine freedom, which requires hope, faith, perseverance, and responsibility for oneself.

So here God's people seek release from their anxieties by thinking, "If we can just go back to the way we were, we will be OK. We'll be safe. Life will be easier and uncomplicated.

God punishes the people for their lack of faith. The covenant God made with them called them to faithfulness, to trust in the promises of the Lord. But here the people have lost faith in God. They have broken the covenant. How quickly they have forgotten all the good things God had done for them in the Exodus from Egypt.

So God punishes the people. He sends serpents whose bite kills them. This drives the people to repent. They turn to Pastor Moses and tell him, "Do something to stop this. Take away our pain. Do it now!"

Moses tells them to make a bronze image of a serpent and mount it on a pole. If people are bitten, they are to look at the image, and they will recover. They do, and their journey to the Promised Land resumes. God gave them a sign of hope and healing along their journey, a sign to strengthen their faith.

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That image of a serpent on a pole has an interesting, long history. It was in the first Temple in Jerusalem until King Josiah removed it in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BC. In Greece and other ancient nations, it became the symbol of the medical profession, as it is to this day. Jesus refers to this event in our Gospel reading today, and later in John's Gospel (11.32). Jesus claims of His death, "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to Myself." The cross is for Christians a sign of hope and healing, so God can do as the great hymn sings:



Guide me ever, great Redeemer,  
pilgrim through this barren land.

The paradox of the cross is that an instrument of death became a sacrifice that gives life to the world. Sacrifice is a universal practice in religions. People make sacrifices to appease the gods, earn their god's favor, to give thanks. Jesus' sacrifice is unique in that our God sacrifices Himself, in the person of His Son, to save and bring healing to the world. How is this so? Because the cross shows us the power and depth of God's love for us. A famous saying of Benjamin Franklin, which has become popular in our time, is, "Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy." Nice saying. But the truer statement is, the cross is proof that God loves us and wants us to have the fullness and joy of life.

And where do we receive this sign of healing and hope, to strengthen us in our pilgrimage through life, from the covenant God makes with us

in Baptism to the life of the world to come? Right here, at the Lord's Table. Here we receive food for our faith, the medicine of immortality, for our journey with the Lord through life.

Thanks to my daughter and son-in-law living in northern Arizona, I have been able to go on some of the most amazing trips of my life: hiking and rafting in the Grand Canyon. Andrew, for a time, was the outdoor program director for Fort Tuthill, a military recreation base in Flagstaff, Arizona. He organized trips in the Canyon. It is a place like no other, of awesome grandeur. But it is also a dangerous place. It is very easy to become dehydrated down there. So, before every trip Andrew would get the group together for instruction and safety procedures. One of his directives was, "Stay hydrated." Drink water, and lots of it. Another was to stay properly nourished with salty foods, to keep the sodium levels in our bodies at proper levels.

So, the guidance for today is, in your faith journey, you will need to stay properly nourished. Life will have its joys and sorrows, ups and downs, joyful times and times of despair. There will be times of doubt, times of guilt when you will need the forgiveness of God that comes to us in the Holy Communion. So, nourish your faith by feeding on Christ. Turn to Christ, who is our hope and source of healing. Come to the Table of the Lord, the place where Christ is lifted up in bread and wine to draw all people to Himself, for the salvation of the world.

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In a few weeks we will complete the Lenten journey to the cross. In the Good Friday liturgy, as the cross is processed to the front of the Church, the crucifer cries out three times: "Behold the life-giving cross on which hung the Savior of the world." It is a dramatic enactment of what Jesus says in our Gospel reading today, John 3.14: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life."

It is the sign of mercy, the proof of forgiveness, the vehicle of grace, and the banner of peace. Amen.