

## Lent Week 4: Leaning into Wholeness

*John 3: 14-16*

<sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

*Numbers 21: 4-9*

<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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.” <sup>6</sup> Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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.” <sup>9</sup> 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.

One year ago, our world changed. This week marks one year since the World Health Organization deemed the virus a pandemic. One year since we’ve last met in person at church; since we’ve heard the choir’s song, since we’ve passed God’s peace with handshakes and hugs. One year of wandering in the uncertainty of the pandemic wilderness. Remember when we thought this would only last a few weeks? Then we said maybe a month or two at the most. Which became six months, then turned into nine...and here we are at the one-year point. This has lasted a lot longer and been a lot harder than we originally imagined. If we zoom in on our story, the Israelites are feeling the same way. After being freed from Egypt, their journey to the promised land should’ve only taken a couple of months according to the way the crow flies. But their wilderness journey has taking a lot longer and been far more difficult than they could have ever imagined.

So perhaps we can relate to Israel’s grumbling. When the days begin to look the same. When we are constantly having to adjust our lives to survive. When our anxiety is high it is easy to lose our sense of gratitude. I can imagine one can only feast on manna recipes for so long before the grumble-fest begins. And truthfully, they have a lot to complain about. They haven’t gotten very far; they are still stuck at the Red Sea. They are being attacked by surrounding tribes. Food and water supplies are scarce. And from their perspective Moses hasn’t done his job and neither has God. So inside of the wilderness, they lose their sense of gratitude.

They forget that when they said “The water’s too bitter!” God sweetens it for them. When they said, “We don’t have enough food,” manna descends from the heavens. When they cried out, “We’re thirsty!” God tells Moses to strike a rock where water gushes out. When they complain, “We’re tired of manna, manna, manna!” God sends a flock of quail for them to enjoy. Again and again, Israel complains and God provides. But in their survival mindset they forget about the gifts of God’s providence along the way.

But notice it is not the complaining or the forgetting that drives God crazy. It’s their desire to return to Egypt. To go back to slavery system. Back to what is familiar for the sake of false security. I mean, they would rather go back to the oppressive predictable past than the uncertain future God was leading them toward. And it is this that drives God up the wall.

So as divine punishment, God sends fiery, poisonous serpents. Which is the last thing a hiker wants to happen, and it does not paint God in a favorable light, does it? But clearly, this a story not to be taken literally, but as one meant to connect the dots back to another story. Another story involving humans and serpents. Hmm, where else do we encounter humans and serpents? Remember when the first humans are in the garden and they thought they knew better than to trust God. And whenever we think we know better than God, it always comes back to bite us. The story is a redramatization of humanity’s vicious cycle of choosing the ways of death over and over again. And have not these last 12 months exposed the same cycle? 529,000 lives. Which if we took one step per person, by the end we would’ve walked more than 100 miles. And as the vaccine fills us with hope for a return back to normal life, the question from the story confronts us: will we choose the oppressive past we knew which will only come back to bite us, or will we move into the freedom of God’s future?

What happens next is powerful. Israel cries out again, and God provides a vaccine. Only God’s grace can break our vicious cycle. So God tells Moses to construct a serpent made of bronze and to lift it up for the people to see and those who choose to look upon it will be healed. You see, they must look upon the image of their own destruction if they are to be saved—and so do we. If we are going to be healed from anything—racism, sexism, anger, fear, or the serpenty voices which fill us with lies about ourselves—we have to take a hard look at it—not in judgement or condemnation, but in the grace of the God who loves the world. We have to see look at it. As Ida B. Wells once said, “The only way to right wrongs is to turn a light upon them” and keep holding them up.

This is the point Jesus is trying to make when he speaks of himself being lifted up on the cross like Moses does with the snake. It’s on the cross, Jesus holds up a mirror of our violent vicious cycle, and then breaks the cycle by offering God’s mercy, forgiveness, and compassion. Healed people heal people. And hurt people, hurt people.

The truth is we are people who are both hurt and healed. So Lent is the time when we lean in, taking an honest look at where God’s grace can pool up in our lives. It’s not a journey most people take, but you are a people who are compassionate and courageous. And as a new dawn rises on a post-Covid era, my prayer is that we walk step-by-step and hand-in-hand toward God’s new future as a church who is willing to look at the hard stuff, and in the process are somehow being freed, healed and made whole. For God so loves the world. For God so loves us all. Amen.