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Scripture: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

Called to Deep Healing

For many people, the pain and sorrow of this past year have been too much to bear. Illness, death, unemployment, broken relationships, hatred, violence, political unrest, and natural disasters are always present in this world. But this year has brought some combination of these things to almost every global citizen at the same time. And some of us have experienced great personal losses unrelated to the worldwide phenomenon. All of us have been in the wilderness.

Wilderness pushes us to our limits.¹ It confronts us with our vulnerability and exposes our wounds. It reminds us of our needs and limitations. Facing the wilderness, God's people began complaining about the loss of things they once had control over. I'm not quite sure what word best describes the story from Numbers 21. Quirky? Confusing? Confounding? Troubling? All of these words work for me.

Of course, we could use these same words to describe our own lives. My hope is that after spending some time with the story from Numbers and the words found in John we will be better equipped to find healing deep in the wilderness.

Prayer: *God of Light, in the psalms we are told to give thanks to you, for you are good; for your steadfast love endures forever. When pain and sorrow engulf us, this task seems impossible. Guide us as we search for your love and healing. Help us to remember and to remind each other that you are with us in our wandering and wondering. Help us to trust in you, the one who calls us in love. Amen.*

Let's review the context for the story found in Numbers 21. The sons of Jacob, who was also known as Israel, moved from Canaan to Egypt when Joseph was in power. By the time the twelve brothers and their offspring died, the Israelites had become so numerous and strong that the new ruler of Egypt was threatened by them. So the Egyptian authorities enslaved the Israelites and oppressed them with hard, back-breaking labor.

But Moses, an Israelite who was adopted by the Egyptian ruler's daughter, confronted the pharaoh and demanded that he let the Israelites leave. After a series of miracles and plagues, the pharaoh relented. God provided a miraculous escape from Egypt, an exodus through the Red Sea.

But their journey back to the land promised to them was neither quick nor direct. They spent nearly a year camping near Mt Sinai, where God made a covenant with them and provided a long list of laws and instructions for how they were to live. Then they traveled on toward their destination.

The physical distance to Canaan, the land where the nation of Israel would be established, is relatively short, but because they worshipped a golden calf idol, didn't trust God when Moses sent spies into Canaan, and revolted against Moses, the people were doomed to a generation of living in the desert wilderness.

¹ Portions of this sermon are adapted from Lent 4 focus statement and sermon starter, Lent-Easter Worship Resources, *Leader, Winter 2020-2021*, ©2020 MennoMedia, pp. 43-44.

After victory in a battle against a Canaanite king, they set off again on their journey. That story is told in the first three verses of the chapter, bringing us to the account we're looking at today.

*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."*²

This grumbling wasn't a new phenomenon. It began before they reached Mt Sinai. When they complained about the lack of water, God provided water for them. When they complained about the lack of food, God sent them daily manna, a sweet bread-like substance. But when they remembered the good food they enjoyed in Egypt – the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic – the manna didn't satisfy them. When they begged for meat, God sent them quail. But now, the difficult travel was causing tempers to flare again. They were sick and tired of living on the food they had.

This all sounds familiar. We tend to live in a state of discontent.

Some of us live in a "remember when" state of mind. Remember when we hadn't yet heard of COVID-19. Remember when I had a different job. Remember when our love was new. Remember when people from different political parties worked together. Remember when our church attendance was higher.

Some of us live in an "if only" state of mind. If only I were married. If only I had more money. If only I didn't have to listen to my parents or spouse or boss. If only a different person or group were in charge of this organization or that country. If only we could sing together or have a potluck meal together.

Others of us think in "when/then" terms. When I get out of high school or college or this town, then everything will be great. When I lose weight, then I'll be satisfied with myself. When I finish this big project, then I'll work on my family relationships. When we remove big money from politics, then governments will make better decisions. When we return to worship as normal or when get a new pastor, then all our church problems will be solved.

Of course, these are all related; all are different ways of living in discontent rather than living in the grace of the moment, rather than seeing what God is doing now, rather than asking what God wants us to do now, rather than seeing the benefits our current situation may have produced.

If we're realistic, we know that discontent will always be with us. When we fulfill an "if only" we replace it with another. The reality of the "remember whens" wasn't as rosy as we recall. When we achieve one goal, then we realize that some of the old problems remain and we encounter new ones.

Of course, we need to have goals. A bit of dissatisfaction is good motivation to keep pressing on, to keep moving. And, of course, the unusual circumstances of the past year have been extremely disruptive and quite unhealthy on a multitude of levels. But living in a perpetual state of discontent is also unhealthy.

Back to our story, what does God do when the Israelites complain once again? *Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.*³

² Numbers 21:4-5, NRSV.

³ Numbers 21:6, NRSV.

Well, that's disturbing. If only it didn't say that God sent the snakes. Remember when I could read that sentence and not question it? When I get doctorates in theology and biblical studies, then I'll be able to explain it.

Actually, I might be able to explain it now. It seems reasonable that there would be poisonous snakes in the desert. Without an antidote, many of the people who were bitten would die.

For the people who told this story, God controlled everything that happened. If you didn't follow God's ways, you would be punished, even killed. If you followed God's ways, you would be rewarded. For the Israelites, death due to snake bite meant that the people had sinned.

As we continue through the biblical story, we see this understanding change. While it's true that blessings may result from good behavior and difficulties from bad, the biblical writers also acknowledge that good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people. And God is present through it all.

While we may not agree on the amount of control God has on individual events, I think we can all agree that there are no simple explanations for everything. Faithful people live and die in violent situations from which there is no escape. Unethical, corrupt, depraved people benefit from their wicked ways. Each of us has been healed or rewarded whether we deserved it or not. Each of us has been hurt or punished whether we deserved it or not. Many things that happen can be explained; some cannot.

Reading on: *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.*⁴

Because of their history with God – the exodus from Egypt, the promises made to their ancestors, the teachings from Moses and other leaders, the provision of food, water, and safety in the desert – the people turned to God in their distress. They confessed their mistakes. They had complained against God and against Moses as a group, so they made their confession as a group. They didn't yet know that they could approach God on their own so they asked Moses to help them. And Moses prayed to God on their behalf.

Group confession is something that may be uncomfortable or difficult for us. Our worship services during Lent and Advent usually include a words of confession and assurance. During our time of confession this season we've been invited to name the forces that keep us from deep relationship, commitment, and wisdom. Today we'll name the obstacles to deep healing. In the coming weeks, we'll consider those factors that keep us from deep growth, hope, and living.

When we join our voices in these readings, we're saying something a bit different than if read them individually. While it's important to make confessions or apologies as individuals, it is also important to do this as a group.

People question the necessity of group statements. Think of a national statement apologizing for slavery. Or a denominational statement acknowledging inaction against sexual violence. We might wonder if it's possible for one group of people to apologize to another group.

But these corporate confessions are important. They acknowledge that sin is not only individual, but also systemic. A necessary step in breaking down systems of hate, misuse of power, and evil is acknowledging that they exist. We confess to God and to each other. We ask God to help us in in doing what we can to make things right.

⁴ Numbers 21:7, NRSV.

I wonder what we might need to confess as a congregation. What might we need to confess to God? What might we need to say to someone in our midst or to someone who has left us? What might we need to say to our neighbors, to some group in our community, or to another congregation?

The most confounding part of the story from Numbers 21 is how it ends. *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.⁵

How can God, who commanded the people not to make any images and punished them for worshipping a golden idol in the shape of a calf, tell them to make an image of a venomous snake and then promise that everyone who gets bitten can simply look at the serpent and be healed? Could anything be more contradictory and ridiculous?

I suppose the first thing to note is that God did not instruct the people to worship the snake, only to look at it. Later on, in 2 Kings, chapter 18, we read that King Hezekiah shattered the bronze serpent that Moses had crafted and removed it from the temple because the Israelites had begun to worship it.⁶

But for the Israelites in the desert wilderness, looking at the bronze snake after being bitten was an act of trust. The snake was a tangible way for God to offer healing and to demonstrate trustworthiness. Looking at the snake was a tangible way for the people to express their trust in God. Facing the source of their pain helped them to find deep healing.

We can identify with the Israelites. Wilderness pushes us to our limits. It confronts us with our vulnerability and exposes our wounds. It reminds us of our needs and limitations. Facing the wilderness, God's people began complaining about the loss of things they once had control over. But God wanted them to learn a lesson in love. God was their provider and healer; they just needed to see it.

Often our lives become a quest for control, an attempt to bring all around us under our power to serve our needs. When we are confronted with overwhelming circumstances, disease, death, economic hardship, loneliness, or depression, we are reminded of our vulnerability. Deep in the wilderness, where our desperation is exposed, we hear God calling us to deep healing.

The gospel of John compares Jesus to the snake lifted up in the desert. This image connects these two passages. A key factor in both Bible texts is that God begins with people where they are; with their messed up and messy lives; with their shortcomings and inadequacies.

John 3:16-17 states that God loves the entire world, including every person who has ever lived, is living now, or will live. No matter who they are. No matter where they live. No matter what they've done.

Jesus reminds us of God's love, that in our desperation God came among us to bring healing and life. How might God use the events of the past year to bring us into new life? How might naming and facing the source of our wounds bring about healing?

By turning to Jesus, we are transformed by God's love into whole people, created anew in Christ Jesus. And that is good news indeed. Thanks be to God! Amen.

⁵ Numbers 21:8-9, NRSV.

⁶ 2 Kings 18:4