

4th in Lent, Year B, March 22, 2009
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God Will Provide

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

Numbers 21:4-9

4) They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; 5) they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”

The Hebrew children are halfway to the Promised Land. They have faced some hard times and survived in their Exodus from Egypt where they were slaves. Crossing the Sea of Reeds is long behind them and water gushing from a rock that Moses struck with his rod is long behind them. They have been fed manna from heaven – and they still have it but they do not liking it. They think it not fit for men and soldiers – for women and children maybe but not for men who have to work hard, fight battles and organize their daily routine.

Just prior to the reading for today they have come to the borders of Edom and they would like to cross over. They ask permission. These Edomites are distant relatives but they refuse to let them cross. They offer to pay for water and they promise not to wander off the beaten pathway but still the Edomites refuse to let them cross. To back up their refusal they muster their military strength which is much greater than the Hebrews. The Hebrews know that they mean business so that means they have to go around Edom – the long way around, and they don't like it. It's desert land, harder to find water and food. But they go on the long way around and they are complaining against God and against Moses. Furthermore, they are getting tired of the food. Even though it is manna from heaven – angels food, so to speak, they call it miserable food. That's not very nice to call something God has given you a miserable gift. Do we ever do that? I hope not.

They are stuck halfway between promise and fulfillment – the promise of the Promised Land but they are only halfway there. Perhaps we as a church in seeking pastoral leadership are halfway between God's promises to provide a pastor.

At this point in their lives the wilderness looks permanent. They have been wondering around in it for over three generations. As someone said, “Forty years is a long time in a sandbox.” Sandbox, of course, refers to the desert.

Our church has not been without an installed pastor for forty years but it may seem our wilderness experience is beginning to look permanent. Don't be discouraged, God will provide a way!

Now God has been protecting them all along the way. They have been passing through areas where these venomous snakes have been but they have not been bitten. These venomous snakes begin biting them and they are dying. God gives them something to really complain about. He removes his protection from them. I know it says that he sent the venomous snakes among them but all he had to do was remove his protection.

6) Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 7) The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us. So Moses prayed for the people.

There is judgment in this story – judgment about people complaining and being impatient. It can be a warning for us.

The people begin to realize that they really did not have it so bad after all. They also realize that to not appreciate what God had given them is a sin, and they had been expressing that ingratitude and bitterness against God and their leader, Moses. They repent and ask Moses to pray for them and ask the Lord to take away the snakes. Moses, like a good leader, shows no bitterness and prays for the Lord to remove the snakes. Moses had a right to feel bitter about their complaints but he didn't. He was above their complaints. That can be very hard to do but it is a good mark of a leader that he/she can not let the criticisms of others drag them down. Moses was that kind of a leader. So he prays for the people.

8) The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” 9) So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

And God provides a way for the people to be saved. He tells Moses to make a snake and put it on a pole and when anyone is bitten by a snake and looks at the bronze snake on the pole he will live. God provides a way! The people stop complaining about their food, about their conditions, about what life is dealing them. They find water and they even sing songs of praise. They defeat their enemies and they journey on to the Promised Land.

God provides a way! I'm not sure we appreciate the way God provides for these Israelites. After all, a snake on a pole – wasn't it a serpent that got us all into this trouble when he tempted Eve to eat of the apple in the Garden of Eden? On the other hand God was using what was most available and what most concerned a people – these venomous snakes. If we were bitten by such a snake we would go to the doctor and request medicine that would counteract the poison that had been injected into us. And we should go to a doctor but what I am trying to say is that we like to control the method that God will use to save us. When we are in control we limit the means that God can use and thereby make healing a modern phenomenon. But the modern phenomenon, no matter how good, does not have the promise of God behind it. The reason the means that God uses is so effective is because of God's promise. If you look you will live!

What is God's promise to us? Isn't it that he will provide the man or woman of God to lead us? Let us not limit Him by the means we provide.

That bronze serpent on a pole is carried by the Israelites to the Promised Land and erected in the Temple. In time it loses its significance, it is "domesticated" so to speak. Eventually a new pole, a Cross, has to be erected and this time God himself is upon it, once for all. It is so those who find themselves dying in the wilderness can look to the Cross and live.

And this gets us to our Gospel reading for today. We can better understand John 3:16 because of Numbers 21:4-9.

John 3:14-21

...14) Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15) that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

16) For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

The serpent was a mark of God's anger as well as of his mercy. The people could be saved only if they looked upon the image that could bring about their death. We are to believe for the sake of eternal life. This is not simply a restoration of earthly life. God once saved the people by calling upon them to gaze on the serpent. Now, God would save the people by having them gaze in belief upon the Son, lifted up.

Next comes John 3:16, in which the "so" is often misunderstood. The Greek *houtos* means "so" in the sense of "just so," or "in this way," or the more archaic, "thusly." We could translate the verse as "This is the way God loved the world, with the result that he gave his only Son, in order that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 is not about how much God loved the world. It is about in what way God loves the world.

It is most important to notice that God loves the world. God deeply loves the world that he created, and God longs for this creation to live. It is not only God's own people whom God will save, as in the Numbers story. It is the cosmos that God has loved, precisely by having given the only son. And is it only the human world? No, God loves the whole world that he made and he loves it by giving his son. That was Jesus' announcement. I'm here because the God who loved you of old, still does. He sent me to tell you, to show you, to gather you up into life with him forever.

Have we ever been so truly and consistently desired by another as we are by God? No; God loved the world in this way that he gave the Son so that we might have eternal life.

19) This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20) Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come

into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21) But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”

God has provided a way and the way is to be born from above by the Spirit of God entering into our life and making us a new person. This means that our life changes, we are not the same old person as we once were. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.”

It is a matter of being reconciled to God and through him being reconciled to one another. In Paul’s words, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.” (2 Corinthians 5:18-19)

So, God has provided a way of salvation. It is a new birth brought about by the Spirit of God and, through that birth we become new persons, new creatures in Christ Jesus. Without that new birth we can not enter into the Kingdom of God.

Do we believe this? Sure we do but have we made a commitment to it? The doctor tells us that heart transplants can save our lives. Do we believe it? Sure, we believe that modern medical technology can do such things; we know it has been done and so we believe. But it’s your body, or my body, that needs the heart transplant. Now its time to make a commitment; there is a great difference between believing something and making a commitment to what you believe.

(What’s in your future?)

What about Nicodemus’ future; Jesus’ future? We have no control over our future unless we are with Christ. The future is a mystery to us unless we are with Christ.

However, we believe we can control the future so we set goals for buying a house, for our children’s education, for retirement but the future has other plans. Berney Madoff controls our retirement and although the destination may have said “Charlotte” the plane lands in the Hudson River.

When you know that the future will bring God you know how to die. When you know what the future will bring there is joy! When you know what the future brings there is life! It is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.