

Trinity United Methodist Church

October 4, 2020

“Through the Wilderness, Pt. 5”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Numbers 21:4-9 (NIV)

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 wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” **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. **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, they lived.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Open our ears and our hearts, oh Lord. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

We’re now in the fifth week of our sermon series, *Through the Wilderness*. You might be tired of hearing about the wilderness by this point, but friends, that’s part of the point. Because the wilderness often seems to drag on and on and on and on. How many months have we been in the current wilderness of COVID-19 and face masks and everything else, and how much longer do we have to go? A long time, indeed.

The good news is that next week you get a slight break from the wilderness, as we will hear from our three Associate Lay Leaders. Nancy Griffin, our Lay Leader, will be helping them lead in worship next week. So I know you will want to worship with them. And then we have one more week of the wilderness, and then we launch into some really fun stuff. I’m going to be preaching from the Book of Revelation—just in time for

our national election. You ready? Buckle in. It's quite possibly, next to the Gospel of Mark, my favorite book of the Bible, and we will see why.

So far we have learned that the wilderness is a time of learning. The wilderness is a time of challenge, a time of dependence upon God, and a time of doubt. I've talked about, and maybe you have felt, too, how the wilderness, especially this wilderness time of COVID, seems to be shining a magnifying glass on us like we would concentrate the sunlight on a bug or a blade of grass, just to watch it burn. It has seemed like I've been under a magnifying glass of sorts. And I don't know about you, but in my own life, I don't particularly like what has been exposed.

Whatever the wilderness is, we typically didn't ask for it. Whether it be a pandemic, whether it be a health diagnosis, whether it be the loss of a loved one, loss of a job, a divorce, or whatever the case might be—we didn't ask for it. We didn't ask to be under these circumstances. We didn't ask to be told we couldn't sing in church and that we have to wear these crazy things all the time. We didn't ask for national unrest over racial matters yet again. We didn't ask for what is just, quite simply, the political circus that we have right now. But friends, we read even Jesus, after his baptism, was driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, no less.

And so often, in the wilderness, we reach a point where we long for comfort. Early on when our Healthy Church Team was meeting and going through the parameters from our Conference over how we would be allowed to reopen and such, they kept stressing, "No singing! No singing! No singing!" And Richard had the idea, and I agreed with him at the time, of "Okay, we'll play religious hymns and so forth, but ones that aren't necessarily recognizable, so that way we're not tempted to sing along with them. And after that first week, I quickly realized, Nope. We need the good old hymns. We need the songs that we all know and love, because most importantly, we need comfort during this time. We *long* for comfort. In our wilderness experiences, we long for something or someone to take the pain away.

And so where do we often find comfort? For far too many of us, at some point in our lives, we will find ourselves turning to false sources of comfort. Comfort of our own making. We might find that certain substances at least numb the pain long enough for us to live a little. We might find that certain activities do the same. We might find that certain people bring some comfort, until, that is, they disappoint us. Because, guess what? They're people. It's what people do. And we are uncomfortable again.

These sources of comfort of our own making will fail us every single time. And in today's reading, the Israelites are indeed suffering. We read in Numbers that this is only the second time, and all of the grumbling and complaining—you remember that theme through the wilderness, the grumbling and complaining?—In all of the grumbling and

complaining, this is only the second time that the Israelites have flat-out cried out not just against Moses and Aaron and sometimes Miriam and the leadership, but they cry out directly against God. They *rebel* against God. And why do they do so? Because as they traveled along the route to the Red Sea to go around Edom—this was after that period of silence I told you about last week. They’re finally on the move again, they’re on the way to the Promised Land, and Edom is in the way. And the King of Edom says, “Nope. None shall pass.” And instead of fighting them, the Lord says, “Go around.” And so that’s what they do. They go around, and in the going around, how do we feel when we have to go around traffic here in Hampton Roads? Especially if we’re running late? We feel impatient. We’re flat-out told, “The people grew impatient on the way.”

And so they spoke out against God and against Moses. And once again—you can almost say it with me—“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread!” (Never mind, God, that you’re giving us this manna.) “There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” (Thanks, God.) Their impatience leads to rebellion. And what happens when we rebel? We think that we know better, and so we rebel. We want *our* way, and so we rebel.

And friends, that might work out in history, as at the founding of our nation. Sometimes it *doesn’t* work out in history—not even a hundred years later. Often rebellion works out in the movies, in something like *Star Wars*. But rebellion never works against God. Our rebellion against God always leads to consequences that include, sometimes, death.

You might think, “Well, that’s pretty harsh of God.” And it’s not that God always causes death. It’s that God doesn’t force anything on us. God is love, 1 John tells us, and love doesn’t demand its own way, Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians. And so sometimes God leaves us to our consequences.

Look at climate change, for instance. I figure last night wasn’t charged enough. Let’s bring up another charged issue, right? Climate change. Now, based on what we know of science, we would be quick to say today that they’re more than simply acts of God, although as worse and worse as the natural disasters tend to get, wildfires out West have already broken last year’s record and we’re not even halfway through the season. It’s horrid to *not* consider that these are acts of God. Or are these natural disasters that seem to be caused by climate change, consequences caused by humanity and our use of fossil fuels and the like? Or, is this just simply a cycle of earth, pointing to the natural rise and fall of the temperature of the earth? Well, friends, who created earth with those cycles? Certainly God *could* reach down and cool things down a degree or two for us.

And so in this text, it is God who sends venomous and poisonous snakes. Snakes. *Why'd it have to be snakes?* (I'm full of pop references.) But one of the things not to miss here is that this text, while historical, is also highly symbolic. For this text, in the ancient Near East, snakes and serpents are, of course, signs of death due to their venom. They're synonymous with the evil power of the underworld and the power of chaos. But, in the ancient Near East, snakes and serpents were also symbols of fertility, of life and healing. Look at the medical emblem, which we get from the Hippocratic Oath and Greek culture. What's wrapped around the staff? A snake. Snakes are also signs of fertility, life, and healing. Maybe that's why my great-grandmother wanted to hang a snake that we killed one time over the clothesline to bring rain. One of those old wives' tales. Yes, we looked at her just like you're looking at me now. *What?*

But regardless, snakes were these potent symbols of death and of life simultaneously. And so people were dying. The word "poisonous" can also be translated out of Hebrew as "fiery," due to the burning of the venom that they felt as the snakes would bite them. But also in symbolism, perhaps, the burning of their sin and their rebellion as well.

And so the people cried out for comfort, for healing, for deliverance. Here God could have said, "Nope. I'm done with you. Forget this mess. Peace out, y'all." But even in the rebellion, God provided comfort and healing and deliverance. "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.' 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, they lived."

How crazy is that? *What?* Especially with our modern sensibilities, that sounds entirely too easy. *All we gotta do is look at the snake on the pole and we're good?* But remember the context. They were in the wilderness, and in the wilderness it is God who continues to make a way, time after time after time, no matter how much they grumble and complain. And seeking comfort, so often we look inward. We call it "navel-gazing," and it happens to so many churches that wind up dying because they just look inward. They look *down* the whole time. And think about when we're desiring comfort, where do we look? We look *down*, right? It's almost like we have blinders and we can only see what's right in front of us. And again, in the words of Dr. Phil, *How does that usually work for us?*

But to look upon the serpent, what did they have to do? They had to look *up*. "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?" But you see, it was still their choice. Because again, God never forces anything on us. Yet God also made it clear: "If you really desire comfort and healing and deliverance, if you want to *live*, this is the way."

As we near the end of the wilderness narrative in the Bible, we've seen how wilderness time is a time to learn. To un-learn what we think we already know, to re-learn some things. It's a time that challenges us to our core. It's a time that reminds us how dependent we are on God. It's a time that makes us wrestle with God in our doubts. And now, our times of wilderness show us, in this powerful symbol of death and life, that it's only in death that true comfort can be found. *It's only in death that true comfort can be found.*

You might be thinking, "Um, Pastor, that doesn't sound too comforting." Well, stick with me. How did the Israelites find themselves in need of comfort to begin with? They rebelled. They sought their own way. And in order to find true comfort, true healing, true deliverance, they had to give up. They had to deny their own way. They had to die to themselves.

Looking up is the easy part. Getting over yourself is so much harder. And yet, it's the central message of the gospel. In John chapter 3, Jesus is talking with a Pharisee, Nicodemus, and says to him, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him. 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." Most of us know that one. "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned. But whoever does not believe stands condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

It almost sounds too good to be true. *All we have to do is believe? All we have to do is look up to Jesus?* And yet, it's still our choice.

I'll always remember from my freshman year at Tech, I was having typical late teenage angst and doubts and so forth. My room that freshman year, I got put with a guy who was a math and physics double major. Computer geek if there ever was one, and not a guy you expect to have conversation about faith with, necessarily. And one night I'm giving him all my reasons for doubting, and as I climbed up into my loft and turned out the light, he said, "Well, Dan, it just comes down to faith. Do you believe...or not?" But with that belief comes dying. Dying to self. Submission.

In any 12-step recovery program, the first three steps are the most critical. To admit that we are powerless over our addiction. Second, to come to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. And number three, to make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand Him.

You might be thinking, "That's coming in from left field. Why are you putting that in? I'm not addicted." Well, maybe in the wilderness, God is showing you that you really

are addicted. Maybe to anger. Disappointment. Fear. Jealousy. Feeling sorry for yourself. Despair. Anxiety. Pride. Or prejudice. And don't you long for comfort? Don't you long to be free from those things?

Moreover, in Mark chapter 8, right smack in the middle of the gospel, Jesus called the crowd to him along with the disciples and said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross,"--that new symbol of death and of life simultaneously--"and then follow me."

Friends, the wilderness is a hard, hard place to be, to live, to thrive. And true comfort cannot be found on our own. True comfort is found when we look up, when we surrender. When we die to self and we look to Jesus. Because only in death to ourselves and in living in Christ can true comfort be found. The choice is ours, moment by moment, day by day.

And in closing, we are not supposed to sing in worship, but I am going to. I invite you to sing along in your hearts:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus / Look full in His wonderful face /

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim /

In the light of His glory and grace.

Thanks be to God. Amen.