

“We Detest this Miserable Food”

Salado UMC—11 March 2018

Lent 4

Preaching Text: Numbers 21:4-9—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

“Health food makes me sick”—Calvin Trillin (1935 -).

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Hear the day’s lesson:

4 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. 5 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.” 6 Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.

7 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. 8 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.” 9 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
(Numbers 21:4-9—NRSV).

Lent is an expedition of penitence in which we join imaginatively with Jesus as he encounters the cross. Eventually we come out of Lent and celebrate God’s victory over sin and death in that glorious day we call Easter. Lent is an all-too-human reminder that prior to the victory of Easter human beings must endure a route which takes us through pain and shadows. We always want comfort but Lent plainly offers us a cold truth—our ultimate desire compels us to enter the wilderness of life.

Our story from Numbers today completes a sequence of “complaining stories” that the Pentateuch offers concerning the Israelite desert/wilderness episodes. Starting all the way back at Exodus 16:2-3 the people bellyached and whined about everything in the wilderness. The complaining comes to a head in our lesson today. The grouching about Moses and Aaron—and eventually Yahweh—has now gone over the top! Even the ever-patient God has finally gotten a belly full.

Do I need to share how annoying constant complaining is? In Graham I had a church member, a reputed pillar of the church, who griped constantly about his service club: food, leadership, day they met, place they met, etc. etc. etc. . . . After listening to him time and again, the last time he [Louis Pitcock] went on his tirade he finished by asking: “David, would you like to join us?” These kinds of people don’t even listen to themselves. By this way, this is not a good way to invite people to church either.

Back to our lesson from Numbers 21. As soon as the complaints are registered with the LORD, straightaway we read: “Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.” Did God send the serpents because the people’s murmuring? We

don't know for sure as the text implies it but does not say this directly. You may draw your own conclusions.

Whatever the case, the people must swallow their pride and ask for Moses' intercession. Now a word about our bulletin cover. A snake that had not yet bitten a Hebrew asked one that had: What do they taste like? They taste like chicken!

The people confess their sin and Moses prays on their behalf. The serpents or snakes do not depart and neither do they stop biting, but Moses offers a healing balm in the desert/wilderness. Moses fixes a snake on a pole—I suppose like a shish-kebob—and instructs the bitten Hebrews to look upon the bronzed serpent. Then they would live. Yahweh helps Moses heal the people willing to repent. Healing or deliverance comes in an unexpected way. Weird story—and I'll give you that. Let's look at what this bizarre story might mean for us some 3000+ years later.

Modern people are deadly fearful of snakes. Here is a typical and long-standing list of things that people are afraid of:

Arachnophobia – The fear of spiders

Ophidiophobia – The fear of snakes

Acrophobia – The fear of heights

Agoraphobia – The fear of open or crowded spaces.

Cynophobia – The fear of dogs.

Astraphobia – The fear of lightning/thunder

Claustrophobia – The fear of small spaces like elevators or other enclosed spaces

Mysophobia – The fear of germs

Aerophobia – The fear of flying

Trypophobia – The fear of holes (an unusual but common phobia—www.fearof.net)

Here is a more contemporary list (blogs.chapman.edu/wilkinson/2015/10/13/americas-top-fears-2015):

Crime: Murder, theft, burglary, fraud, identity theft

Daily Life: Romantic rejection, ridicule, talking to strangers

Environment: Global warming, overpopulation, pollution

Government: Government corruption, drones, gun control, immigration

Judgment of others: Appearance, weight, age, race

Man-Made Disasters: Bio-warfare, terrorism, nuclear attacks

Natural Disasters: Earthquakes, droughts, floods, hurricanes

Personal Anxieties: Tight spaces, public speaking, clowns, vaccines

Personal Future: Dying, illness, running out of money, unemployment

Technology: Artificial intelligence, robots, cyber-terrorism

Could it be that we are most afraid of things that we think might kill us? The desert traveling seems to have been a gigantic shock to the Hebrews. As a replacement for the "land of milk and honey," these folks got a large slice of desert. What they thought of as a promise of liberation from bondage turns into forty years of—please excuse me here—hell. No wonder they missed the so-called fleshpots of Egypt. No wonder they cried out: "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.” These fleshpots to which the Hebrews referred in Exodus were what fed the Israelites when they were slave laborers in Egypt. In their hardship they complained and wished to go back to these fleshpots, back to familiarity and security of being a well-fed slave-labor force. They forgot that Egyptian slavery worked them to death at an early age—but, other than that, well fed.

Of all things—snakes! Those ancient and universal symbols of both fertility and magic. Many of the earliest religions in and around Israel revered these creatures. Yet this God we worship is so incomprehensible, so longsuffering, so merciful that we scarcely can understand the divine attributes. Here is a good one for you, God is so omnipotent/powerful that our God can heal or save us by the symbol of another culture’s symbol of power. Thus, this serpent/snake is a vehicle for a divine curing for a stricken and poisoned group of people whose best spiritual gift is: complaining, murmuring, griping, moaning, and protesting.

As we think of Lent we see this story as a paradox. That is a statement that, despite sound (or apparently sound) reasoning from acceptable premises, leads to a conclusion that seems senseless, logically unacceptable, or self-contradictory. For one example, we might hear a person say: “Deep down, you are really shallow.” So here is a theological paradox: God puts his son on a cross—and by his stripes we are healed or saved! That is through God’s suffering via his son, God redeems us.

My good buddy, Andy Stoker, pointed out a passage from Elie Wiesel’s *Night* (1956—New York: Bantam, p. 76). In this excerpt we read this all-too-human question about God and human justice (theodicy):

One day, as we returned from work, we saw three gallows . . . The SS [guards] seemed more preoccupied, more worried, than usual. To hang a child in front of thousands of onlookers was not a small matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was pale, almost calm, but he was biting his lips as he stood in the shadow of the gallows . . . ‘Where is merciful God, where is He?’ someone behind me was asking.

At the signal, the three chairs were tipped over . . . Then came the march past the victims. The two men were no longer alive . . . The child, too light, was still breathing . . . And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death . . . Behind me, I heard the same man asking: ‘For God’s sake, where is God?’ And from within me, I heard a voice answer; ‘Where is He? This is where—hanging here from this gallows . . . ’ ”

Let us pray

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