

Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía
Hempstead, New York
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The Fourth Sunday in Lent B ~ March 14, 2021

Numbers 21:4-9, Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: Amen

We shake our heads and laugh about the foolishness of the Israelites complaining in the wilderness. They were so self-absorbed that they couldn't even speak coherently: "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." (Num 21:5.) How could there be both **no** food and **miserable** food? Really, all they knew was their fear of going forward into the unknown, so they romanticized the lives they'd lived in Egypt, longing to return to what was a life of generations of slavery.

We have a similar problem today, with so many people wanting to return to life as it was pre-pandemic. There were problems in our lives then, too, and even if we could return to that life, we'd have to deal with them. So, rather than wishing for what can't be, we are called today to receive God's love and to live in it, coping with our challenges. That means that we still have to do the hard work of planning and preparing **before** we can return to in-person worship, and we **must** continue to take precautions to protect both ourselves and others.

This is one of the ways that we live in the love that God has taught us. God is there to see us through the hard times, but we still have to live through them. God didn't make the serpents stop biting the people in the wilderness. God gave the Israelites a means to **heal** from the bites that continued, so they wouldn't die. They had to look up at the bronze serpent and recognize their own sinfulness – and repent – in order to be saved. We too, need to recognize the times and the places in our lives when and where we have departed from the path God has shown us, and then we can repent of those mistaken turns, and return to God. It's not just a matter of finding a navigational solution to the problems we face, like using a GPS. God is waiting for us, but God needs us to recognize the difference between taking Jesus' Way and opting for the detour around the necessary, although maybe difficult, path.

This is the significance of our journey through Lent; we seek the **reason** for Jesus' crucifixion and its meaning, an understanding of what it accomplishes. We see that

God lifting up Jesus – the Son of Man – on the cross is more than his death. Jesus' death is the completion of his mission as God incarnate: he is joined with us in our humanity. God resurrecting him is his being exalted from that crucifixion. But the completion of the cycle is in Jesus' ascension, when Jesus returns to God the Father and makes a way for us to spend eternity with him and the Father. This eternity is of an on-going, never-ending relationship of mutual love between each of us and God.

Without Jesus' intervention, we live lives of darkness, full of wrong turns, poor choices, unhealthy practices. But he **did** intervene with his earthy life, and now that relationship of mutual love with God is available to us. Not solely after we die, but right now. But for a relationship to be mutual, both parties must respond. God has responded, over and over again. And God is ready to engage with us in love, again and again, every day. It's just a matter of our responding in love to God.

Pastor and preaching professor Fred Craddock tells the story of his father, who spent years of his life hiding from the God who was seeking him out: "When the pastor used to come from my mother's church to call on him, my father would say, 'You don't care about me. I know how churches are. You want another pledge, another name, right? Another name, another pledge, isn't that the whole point of church? Get another name, another pledge.'

My nervous mother would run to the kitchen, crying, for fear somebody's feelings would be hurt. When we had an evangelistic campaign the pastor would bring the evangelist, introduce him to my father and then say, 'Sic him, get him! Sic him, get him!' My father would always say the same thing. 'You don't care about me! Another name, another pledge. Another name, another pledge! I know about churches.'

I guess I heard it a thousand times. One time he didn't say it. He was at the Veteran's Hospital. He was down to 74 pounds. They had taken out the throat, put in a metal tube, and said, 'Mr. Craddock, you should have come earlier. But this cancer is awfully far advanced. We'll give radium, but we don't know.'

I went in to see him. In every window—potted plants and flowers. Everywhere there was a place to set them—potted plants and flowers. Even in that thing that swings out over your bed they put food on, there was a big flower. There was by his bed a stack of cards 10 or 15 inches deep. I looked at the cards sprinkled in the flowers. I read the cards beside his bed. And I want to tell you, every card, every blossom, every potted plant from groups, Sunday School classes, women's groups,

youth groups, men's bible class, of my mother's church—every one of them. My father saw me reading them. He could not speak, but he took a Kleenex box and wrote something on the side from Shakespeare's Hamlet. . . . He wrote on the side, 'In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.' I said, 'What is your story, Daddy?' And he wrote, 'I was wrong.'"

It is not until you know God is seeking you in love, not in condemnation; it is not until that moment that the gospel becomes Good News for you.

<https://sermons.com>, Fourth Sunday in Lent, 2021, Fred Craddock, adapted by James Fitzgerald, *Serpents, Penguins, and Crosses*.

Let's pray, Holy God, you so loved the world, that you became a human being and lived among us, sharing the pain of human existence and bringing the love of God to that reality. Open our hearts; unstick our minds and release our fears so that we can return the love you have showered upon us. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. C: Amen