

Lent IV  
Numbers 21:1-9 and Ephesians 2:1-10  
March 14, 2021  
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When the Israelites fled Egypt by way of the miraculously-parted Red Sea, I doubt they fully grasped the impact of their departure. How could they? How could they know it would take forty years to traverse a little more than four hundred miles? How could they have envisioned that the journey through the sand would so thoroughly call upon their reserves of stamina, togetherness, and trust?

Soon after their dramatic departure, the community experienced the deprivation of the wilderness, a crisis of food. From then onward at regular intervals, they cried out to Moses. What are we to eat? Where do we find water in the desert? In what direction are we to be headed? It was the Exodus version of “Are we there yet?” with an added urgency of needing the answers in order to survive.

At each complaint, God delivers. No food? Here is manna in the morning. Need meat? Here is quail in the evening tide. Thirsty? Let the water rush forth from the rock. God supplied a cloud to lead them and commandments to which we still adhere. A rhythm emerged to the dialogue: a need was spoken; God provided.

When we arrive at today’s scripture, the Israelite’s wilderness trek appears nearly complete. The Promised Land beckons on the horizon. I imagine the wanderers encouraging themselves with thoughts of just a few more days, or the greenness of the valley ahead, the joy of unpacked suitcase, a bath that washed away all the sand between their toes, or kitchen table containing colorful fruit. Unexpectedly a detour arises. The company must circle around to enter the land from a more distant direction. When they realize this delay, their complaints erupt again.

We are sick of flat, flakey bits of bread that go moldy by twilight. We have run out of ways to cook quail. We can’t bear rationing our water to make it last through tomorrow’s hike. We have run out of strength, patience, or good humor. We are done. It is the rant of the overly tired, the kind of exaggerated complaining that comes when you cannot imagine having to cope for one more day. Implicit in the complaints is a critique of God’s intentions. Did you bring us out here into this desolate nothingness simply to let us die? This is the Israelite’s deepest fear. God, what are your intentions toward us? Do you will for us life or death?

Up until this moment, whenever the Israelites grumbled in the desert God responded to meet the need. But the next day, rather than awaking to a brunch with waffles, eggs and orange juice or finding a shorter path cut for them across the wilderness, the community encounters snakes. A multitude of life-threatening snakes, a cacophony of hisses. Instead of an ease to their burdens, the situation veers into a more dangerous path.

Before we ponder what meaning we might wrestle from this story, let's be clear about what it does not mean. God, who is rich in mercy, "does not send snakes to punish human missteps," as Cameron Howard rightly asserts, any more than God sends hurricanes, tornados or pandemics.<sup>1</sup> Such a tit-for-tat retribution speaks of a vindictive God, not in line with the larger biblical witness. Furthermore, Israel compiles the Exodus saga from a distance, as later generations look back at their history, pulling together the stories in order to make meaning of their liberation and their ongoing relationship to God. It is akin to how we might look back at our lives and say "I felt alone in that moment of testing and now I see God's presence," or "I made that one mistake. I tripped up for just a minute. But it was a big misstep and it led to all kinds of heartache." Retaining this story, Israel articulates a self-realization: their consistent murmurings against God had fractured the relationship. In a moment of testing, they are found lacking.

Or let's view the scripture from a different angle. Any pilgrim walking across a wilderness learns quickly of the desert's indifference. Wind, cold, lack of water, venomous animals – each is a reminder that nature need not care about our survival. This geographical reality enables a spiritual insight. God exists for more than satisfying our every impatient, petulant, self-absorbed want. God exists beyond our narrow line of focus. Sin, says Simone Weil, arises from our misguided attempts to fill a void. Exhausted, anxious, and ready for a new normal, the Israelites sought immediate relief rather than asking for the strength to persevere in the struggle a little longer.

Lent is a spiritual journey of facing the voids of our lives; a prayerful walk across a desert whose stark landscape can bring up all the wants we typically keep buried. What elements always seem to bite you when you make a wilderness trek from self-satisfaction to God's strange holiness? What hisses at you, causing your heart to lurch and your life to feel threatened? What impatience cracks open a hole in your ability to trust God?

Interestingly when Israel confesses her wayward behavior, God's method of rescue is not to remove the snakes. A simple extermination project would seem the easiest solution. Instead God instructs Moses to craft a bronze replica of this dangerous animal, place it on a pole, and lift it up among the people. Look here, Moses asserts, and live. By God's power and Moses's obedience what has caused death is transformed into a method of healing.

Generations later Jesus will be lifted be lifted upon a pole. The cross, that instrument of death, will be transformed into a symbol of life, a sign of God's defeat of death forever. God specializes in rescue missions, in working through the things that appear to kill us, refashioning them into opportunities for healing, into moments when we learn more about the depth, breathe, and staying power of God's love. "You were dead through sin," says the writer of

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<sup>1</sup> Howard, Cameron B.R. "Commentary on Numbers 21:4-9," Working Preacher, March 15, 2015. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-numbers-214-9-3>. Accessed March 11,2021.

Ephesians, “you were disobedient children, like everyone else. But **God** who is rich in mercy out of a great love, made us alive together.”

This past year may well feel like a rude, unexpected and deadly detour, an extended trek in the wilderness with the good, green pastures of the Promised Land only visible from a distance. We did not know the stamina, togetherness, and courage required for the journey. What we need not question is God’s intentions. Each time the Israelites complained, they were really asking God are you **with** us? God are you **for** us? Is our road toward liberation your road, too? The answer is Yes. Yes, I am with you. Yes, I am for you. Yes, I long for you to live freely in my love. All around you is my grace. Amen.