



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

Sermon March 14, 2021 “Prepared Beforehand” Rev. David Jones

When I first sat down and read through this morning’s scriptures, I confess, I didn’t really remember this story from Numbers, this story of poisonous serpents and a serpent of bronze. It is included in the lectionary this week because of its connection to the famous passage from John, which I did not include this morning. But you know it, it’s the passage that includes John 3:16, the one that says “For God so loved the world that he gave [the world] his only Son.” In anticipation of the awful fate of Jesus, John says, “just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must [Jesus] be lifted up.” This is why we are reading it in Lent, as we prepare ourselves for what comes in Holy Week.

We didn’t have our regular Bible Study this past Thursday, but I found myself imagining how that study may have gone had we read this strange passage from Numbers together. I suspect those gathered would have expressed some real frustration with the way God is being depicted here. Simply because the Israelites are complaining and dissatisfied, simply because they are afraid and distrustful, growing impatient of this time in the harsh wilderness, God punishes them. That’s tough to accept. To complain seems like a pretty mild response to such a dangerous situation, a situation that God brought about, after all. Yes, God freed the Hebrews from slavery, but pangs of hunger feel the same in the wilderness as they did in Egypt.

At the same time, I imagine a discussion of this text would have uncovered some empathy for what God must be feeling, some understanding that after liberating an entire nation, God might be frustrated by the short memory of that same nation.

So we have a situation here, where the people can not understand God, and God cannot understand the people. And as an observer, as a reader of this episode, I am frustrated. Surely the people would rather be free than enslaved--can’t they express their fear and impatience differently, with more gratitude for what God has been doing for them; and surely God freed the people so that they would no longer *be* oppressed by hunger and thirst--can’t God do more than God is doing, or at least be humbler and gentler in responding to this awful predicament God has led the Israelites into.

They both need help. The Israelites are losing their own kin. God is losing God’s own people. Something has got to change and everyone involved knows it. What is happening out there in the wilderness, between slavery in Egypt and a new promised land, is not what is supposed to be happening. What’s happening doesn’t match with what we know to be true about ourselves (what we deserve, and have a right to) *or* about God, about who and what God *is*.

That’s true in our own lives, right. Sometimes when we are in wildernesses of illness or injury, when we are in the wilderness of frayed relationships between our siblings or our children or our partners, when everything seems to be going awry and is out of our control and no one is satisfied, no one is being cared for, no one is happy, part of our frustration is how out of step our world is with our hopes for it, as if our bodies are on one track and our spirits on another. And we can suddenly find ourselves very far down a sideways path we never meant to take, our feet misleading our hearts.

We *know* life is rich in meaning, that that meaning flows out of love--and yet we can find ourselves denying that, we can find ourselves saying there is no meaning to life and love is not real, that things just are the way they are and we have no choice in the matter. Sure, it would be nice to end hunger, to end poverty, it would be nice to reconcile with our loved ones, it would be nice if everyone could walk and work side by side, but, that's just not the way it is. It would be nice if our jobs paid people enough to live comfortably. It would be nice if we all equally shared the tasks of community and household. It would be great if everyone had the time and the means to travel and relax and discover new things. It would be really nice if children were taught to respect one another and recognized the unique gifts and abilities of their peers, really nice if no child was ever bullied or ignored. It'd be nice if our schools and our hospitals were well funded, if folks who can't drive could ride the bus so that they could stay connected and not feel stuck or alone. It would be nice if, in a world that has moved online, everyone could get online, if everyone had a device that they could rely on. It would be nice if after we have retired, our fixed incomes could do more than barely cover rent. All these many things would be very nice, but, no, that's just not to be in the wilderness of this life.

This place between slavery and a promised land also seems to describe our own country. This is not centuries ago any longer, God did break the chains of chattel slavery in this land and did begin to undo the binds of Jim Crow. But as we've been learning this Lent, there are still young adults in *this* community (in Franklin County) who were told not that long ago that they couldn't share toys with other children at school because their dark skin meant they were dirty. And I don't say this to single out Franklin County; I remember the same thing happening to a friend of mine in my hometown in Canada. And we have neighbors today, who have had doors closed in their faces, who have been stared at, who have had the hideous hate of racial slurs yelled at them from car windows. Surely we can not respond to this racism by saying that it too is just the way it is in the wilderness of this life.

We need help. Preparing for our Holy Week involves confessing that we need help. Like the Israelites, like those who lived in first century Palestine, our suffering needs to be lifted up so that we may finally escape the hunger and thirst of this place in-between. Moses and the bronze serpent, Jesus overcoming the Cross--even though God's response to our desperate complaints is not always what it should be, in the end, God also recognizes God's own need for help. God also needs Moses and Christ; God calls them forward and gives them to this world. They are gifts to us from God and they--the best of us--are also gifts from us to God. In the letter to the Ephesians we read from today, these gifts, in human form, are called grace. And grace is how we come to see one another.

In the Gospel According to John it says that Jesus was there in the beginning even before Creation. In Exodus, which covers the same history that the Book of Numbers deals with, it says that Moses was enslaved among the Hebrews; Moses was there even before their liberation. Grace in human form is somehow, mysteriously there before things ever go awry. It is almost like God, who could not contain love, who could not help but create something that would one day be free to reunite with God, something that would one day be free and unencumbered by the suffering of the wilderness to return that love to its source--it is almost like God made that return, that reunion, that love answered and fulfilled *first*, as God's own guide home along God's own road to a promised land.

God knew a free world would be difficult to navigate. We know this free world is difficult to navigate. But God so loved this free world that God made sure there would be some mysterious pull on us, some unseen force that points each and every one of us in the same direction, no matter where we are born, what we look like, how we identify, how we love, what our skills and abilities are; God figured out that such a force could give to humanity a destiny without a script, a destination without placing bounds on our journey. And in the letter to the Ephesians, that destination, our destiny, is to do all those many things we haven't yet done. It is to rely on Moses and Jesus and the other signs of grace in our life to get from the in-between place of hunger and thirst--of economic inequality and racial discrimination--to the promised kin-dom among us.

The world as it is right now *we* have made. We've made it wrong, we've gone astray. But that's okay for now. Because it cannot last. Because *we* were made for something right. We were made to love one another always, and our way home--the way of grace--God already prepared beforehand to be our way even in the wilderness of this life.

Amen.