

Walking With Jesus
Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 11, 2018
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Text: Numbers 21 & John 3

For sports fans, the week ahead is college basketball heaven, with the NCAA tournaments starting (in our office, I bribe everyone to fill out a NCAA bracket by promising a sandwich of choice to the winner - and then what happens is that people who don't really care about the bracket always end up winning over self-perceived experts such as myself! - but I'm going to win this year!). Now, my issues aside - there was a time quite a few years back that often when you tuned into just about any major sports event, you'd see someone in the crowd holding up a big sign: JOHN 3:16 - for a while it was a man in a rainbow afro wig who was often in the crowd! - that was his thing: JOHN 3:16. And the sign was shown with the assumption that in our Christianized culture most folks already have an idea of what JOHN 3:16 is about - that it's in the Bible, about God's love, and about believing in Jesus in order to be saved - and this sign gave that message. These days you don't see JOHN 3:16 signs as often at sports events - but it is still visible in various settings - I saw it on a license plate! - JOHN 3:16 as the cultural summary of Christian faith.

So here's a scenario to think of - what if you were tuned into a sports event (it could happen Pastor Jill!) and there in the crowd someone is holding up a sign that says: NUMBERS 21:6 - this sets off a national scramble for people to dust off their Bibles and find: *Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.* What would people think of that?! - probably not the verse you want to offer as a summary of faith. There's a reason signs are held up that say JOHN 3:16 rather than NUMBERS 21:6.

But - the plot thickens. I've said there's a general knowledge about John 3:16...but how many people know that the verses that lead into John 3:16 are a direct reference to Numbers 21?! - 'just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...for God so loved the world...' I'll tell you how many people know that John 3:16 is

connected to Numbers 21 - hardly anyone! And once you do know - it does not lead one to say "oh, that's a meaningful and helpful connection..." - it leads one to say "what in the world are we supposed to make of that? - what is going on here?!" So, now that we do know - let's do that - let's ask: "what in the world are we supposed to make of Numbers 21 and John 3 together? - what IS going on here?!"

Well, let's start with Numbers 21. It's a strange story: Israel traveling in the wilderness - as they travel, they complain: 'Moses! - there's no food (except for this miserable manna stuff from God), and there's no water'; we're told God responds by sending poisonous snakes, people are bitten, some die. The people tell Moses to tell God they're sorry for complaining - Moses prays - God has Moses make a bronze serpent - it is lifted up on a pole - bitten people look at it and live.

The people sin - God punishes - the people repent - God saves - that's what we're told here. And it's what we're told again and again in the story of the Exodus - a cycle of disobedience, punishment, repentance, restoration. But as you hear me say that, did you hear all of it? - I said that this story and cycle in the book of Numbers is part of the bigger story of the EXODUS. And the Exodus is the story of an oppressed people - the people of Israel enslaved under the power of the Egyptians - the Israelites cry out in their pain - and God hears, listens, responds - God liberates this people - the Exodus - and they are journeying to a land of promise. The Exodus is the identity story of this people - told again and again to remember who they are: they are people of the Exodus and their God is the God of the Exodus.

So, here's what I'm thinking - in Numbers we find two pieces of the same story: a story of a disobedient people and of a people saved from oppression; of a people spitting in the face of God and of a people crying to God in their suffering; a people of sin and a people of need - both true of the same people. And I think that when we look around us, at our world - when we look within ourselves, within you and in me - that we see the same thing - that both stories are always present.

One part of the story is that our world is full of sin - full of people not trusting, not following the will and ways of God; people doing harm to others and self and the earth; people doing violence to others and self and the earth; in all of the many and sullied ways we can think

of and see – this is a world broken by actions that do not trust and follow the ways of God – look around, look within, and that story is told again and again. And God confronts and rejects such destruction of life – God’s pathos decries injustice and ingratitude and apathy. And God does not magically halt the consequences of such destructive ways – I believe that God allows the consequences of such disobedience that lead to great pain and brokenness.

That is my understanding of the consequences of sin – not God sending destruction here and there as a punishment - but that our lives and world deal with the consequences brought on by our own disobedience. Now - that’s not what Numbers 21 says – it is written with a worldview of God’s direct hand in all things. But I believe that the broader scope of what the Bible as a whole says gives that understanding that I’ve expressed about the consequences of sin – and when I bring that understanding to this story, I still don’t like the story (and you don’t have to either), but what I believe the intention of the story to be is this: that turning from the God of the Exodus is a deadly path. That’s part of the story – this story and the human story – and sometimes in life we see that part of the story strongly – the destructive and deadly consequences of sin.

One part of the story too is that our world is also full of suffering: injustice- oppression - violence; sometimes it is done to you or others, and sometimes it simply is part of what comes into people’s lives – tragedy and pain and sickness. People suffer in hunger or from disaster, from violence or from illness, depression and loss. And voices cry out for mercy – for release – for healing – for Exodus. And God hears – the Spirit of God moves to bring justice and healing and hope – God lifts up people out of suffering – God is present with the sufferer – God is presence, peace, love. Sometimes in life we see that part of the story strongly – of suffering and despair and the need for Exodus, for mercy, healing, peace from God. In the world – in our lives - both stories are always present – both sin and need.

And it is both pieces of the story then that we need to bring to John 3. Did you notice in John 3 that it says: ‘just as Moses **lifted up** the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man (Jesus) be **lifted up**...’ – what comes to mind when you hear that Jesus must be ‘lifted up’? I think for most of us our first thought is a reference to the crucifixion of Jesus, the death of Jesus as he is lifted up on the cross. But what’s so fascinating is that ‘lifted up’ has a double

meaning to it – ‘lifted up’ also calls to mind the resurrection of Jesus, raised to life. And it is in those two ‘lifted up’ truths of Jesus Christ together that both the sin and the suffering of this world are embraced by God – the cross as revealing both the destructive power of sin and God’s solidarity with suffering; the resurrection embodying the final word of life that holds us with healing, forgiveness, blessing.

So, when we arrive at John 3:16, and it says...God loved the world so much – a love so deep it is made flesh and blood in Jesus Christ – a love that calls out a belief that brings life to people who are perishing...doesn’t that bring it all together? In John 3:16 you can hear the two stories of sin and suffering both expressed – and hear them as one story of perishing: perishing in sin and perishing in suffering – one story because in Christ God takes both sin and suffering into God’s self – and in Christ neither sin nor suffering is more powerful than the life-giving love of God in Jesus Christ; the ways of death cannot squelch or contain the life God intends for us and this world. Which means it turns out always to be same choice for us in the world, which is: do we abide in the story of death or in the story of life? We know the ways of death, of sin and suffering, in us or through us or to us – both sin and suffering are present, sometimes more one than the other, but of the same deadly power. And God offers the way of life - the passionate love of God – compassion and pathos, outrage and forgiveness, rejecting evil and creating justice – in that love for this world, God wills, brings, gives new life.

What if we would see our lives, others, our world that way – the sin and the suffering both connected to Christ who is lifted up – to the cross and the resurrection? I wonder if it would connect us more deeply to the real story for our lives and our world – as John 3:16 says: that in all things God loves this world, and in all things Christ brings life. Come and be nourished in that story of God’s love, that we may be strengthened to choose, to abide in, the story of life. AMEN.