

Homily, St. Andrew's
Lent 4B, Sunday, March 15, 2015
Numbers 21:4-9

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

We have just passed “hump week” in Lent. The past week was the middle week of Lent and as of today, we have 18 more days, the last 6 of which are also Holy Week, including Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. This means that if you're a ‘glass half full’ kind of person, lent is almost over... if not, then we're only half-way there! To mark this “in the middle” place we find ourselves in, we're taking a break from our exploration of God's covenants to pause in the wilderness with the Israelites.

Unfortunately, this pause, is a difficult one. It comes near the end of the Israelites' wilderness journey such that the joy of escaping the oppression of Egypt is long gone - barely a memory. In actual fact, it took no time at all for the challenge and rigours of life in the wilderness to overshadow everything else... no water... no food... then only manna to eat... then quails... then a long sojourn at Mount Sinai while Moses is on the mountain chatting with Yahweh to receive instructions about how we are to live in covenant relationship. The past 10 chapters of Numbers have been rife with complaint, commonly called stories of murmuring - and with death in the wilderness. Today's story is similar - a story of complaint and death - and it may feel like the journey will never end and new life will never come, but the good news is that today is actually a turning point.

Like so many times before, today our impatience with the rigours of the journey gets the better of us and we speak out against God and 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.” God is tired of hearing about it and reacts by sending poisonous serpents among us, to bite and kill us such that many die. It seems like a bit of an overreaction to a familiar complaint and so I wonder... maybe the tragedy of death that the serpents bring will actually help to bring about the end. Part of the point of the 40 year sojourn in the wilderness is that the past, particularly the idealized past we create in our memories, has to end before the promised future can come.

How many times have you heard yourself or someone else describe the past in ideal terms? Remember when.... there were 200 children in Sunday school? Remember when the church was full every Sunday? Remember when there was no shopping or other activities on Sundays so people went to church? Our attachment to the past and our complaining about the present, if today's story is any indication, stands in the way of moving into the promised land - a land flowing with milk and honey. And maybe it wears on God's patience, just a little, and maybe that's why God sometimes takes drastic, even painful action, to bring about a needed end. Even if it means death.

Good may come out of all this... a good message or good lesson but still, this is a problematic story. Suffering and death are never good and God has already made promises about forbearing with us... with nationhood and land and life in its fullness. And yet here God takes the trouble we are already experiencing... the trials of life in the wilderness... and intensifies them

into death. Can whatever good may come out of this in the end justify the tactics? The temptation to philosophize such theological trouble away is strong, and relatively simple as long as it's not your daughter, or your grand-father, or your best friend who dies in the process. This theological problem is perhaps made worse by our Gospel writer today who uses this story to create an allegory with his Jesus story. Unfortunately, I'm not sure there is any good way of rescuing God from the critique that such tactics of fear and abuse are simply not okay. We can find enough troubles... enough suffering and death... all on our own. We don't need God's punishment, or whatever it was God was thinking in sending poisonous serpents, to make life harder.

That said, God was clear a few chapters back, yet many years ago, that none of the first generation liberated from Egypt would enter the promised land, save one. Even Moses himself would die having only seen the Promised Land from the distance. Following an earlier rebellion and Moses intercession, God forgives the people, but declares: "... none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it..." (Num 14:22-23) So maybe today the horror of the poisonous serpents who kill many will serve to bring the promised new future of a new life in the promised land, just a little bit closer.

Still, the horror of it remains and so out of true repentance or sheer desperation, the people recognize their responsibility, the mistake they made holding up their part of the covenant relationship, and go to Moses to plead: "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." Moses does so and Yahweh responds with rather strange instructions: "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live."

God makes a way for healing and for life but it does seem like a strange solution. It is odd to think that an image of the same thing that is killing, is what will heal. Odd, perhaps, in the somewhat ritualistic way it comes to us in the story, but not so odd when we think of a common therapeutic process for overcoming all manner of death-making circumstances in our lives. Victims of abuse or tragedy have to be able to look squarely at what caused their pain before they can heal from it. Therapists provide the safe place to do that. We can't heal the grief of any loss in our life without bravely and honestly feeling the wide variety of emotions that arise - the anger, depression and negotiating - to be able to let them go. Some immunizations work by giving a small amount of the pathogen, so that our own bodies develop the necessary antibodies to fight off the disease. Being infected to fight infection. The first step to true forgiveness comes when we can tell our story of betrayal and own the hurt we felt. On the flip side, the first step of true repentance only comes when we can break through denial and face the wrong we've done.

Interestingly enough, one of the themes in literature on organizational transformation is the ability to look honestly and fearlessly at current reality. In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins describes "confronting the brutal facts of your current reality" as a necessary step in the journey to greatness. Likewise, the first step to personal and professional transformation in Susan Scott's book *Fierce Conversations* is to "master the courage to interrogate reality." It's true for our church, and it's true for our personal lives. We have to be willing to admit there is a broken relationship before we can reconcile. The healing and life God offers in the wilderness is not magic and is not without effort on our part. We have to be willing to look at what it is that is

causing us pain and bringing about our death. It is not easy - it is not without cost - but it is the path to fullness of renewed life. If the Israelites hadn't been willing to confront the brutal fact that poisonous serpents were biting and killing them, they wouldn't have been able to do anything about it.

But do something about it they did. They repented: "We have sinned..." and they asked God to take away the scourge. Behind such actions was the faith and trust that God not only could do something about the problem, but would. The necessary backstory to any prayer of repentance and petition for help is the belief, however broken down, however thin, however recently abandoned, that the One being addressed can and will respond. That the Israelites in our story today continued to have such faith, particularly when God was responsible for the problem in the first place, is pretty amazing. But then, the necessary flipside to confronting the brutal facts of current reality is the unwavering faith that a different future, a better future - not just a nostalgia for the past - is possible. It is the belief that the God who sends trouble can repent and find another way. It is the deep and unwavering faith that God will step up and life will win in the end. And it is the hope that entry into the promised land is right around the corner.

The wilderness story of the poisonous serpents that kill and the bronze serpent that heals gets to the heart of what a lenten discipline can be about. It is looking at and giving up whatever is it that is killing you, with the hopeful prayer that by facing it, its power will vanish, making room for new life to come. It is about trusting God remains with us, even in the wilderness, and when our complaining gets too much for God and trouble comes, our repentance matters such that God will make a way for healing. May we take heart in the wilderness today and remember that death and loss may be the gateway to our promised future. May these next 18 days, the second half of lent, bring about the end that you seek - the death that is needed - in your life... with the promise that new life, that salvation, is near.