

Wholeness, Healing, Heaven  
Numbers 21:4-9 4

Sermon notes from the pulpit of  
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois  
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Joe preached last week about the changes God might be calling us to make in our church. He asked what tables might need turning over in the temple of our lives. Making changes is hard.

Here in the wilderness on the way to the promised land, our Hebrew brothers and sisters are lamenting the radical changes that have been thrust upon them. They had been slaves in Egypt. Yes, they longed for freedom. And yet, when freedom comes, they don't like it. They are free, but they are wondering in the wilderness, plodding through the desert. They detest the food. They grumble. They complain.

I have sympathy for them. They didn't bargain for this, exactly. Naturally, they are worried. They lack good food and water. They seem to be playing the "victim" card, playing the Ain't it Awful game. *These changes have been thrust upon us, and it's too hard.* So, they nag about Moses. They nag about God. They nag about the food.

God seems to snap. What does God do? God sends snakes to attack the complainers. Not only snakes, but poisonous ones. *You don't like the food?* God seems to be saying. *Well, try this on for size.* Poison snakes. (If you ask me, the only thing worse than poison snakes could have been spiders.)

Very quickly the people repent, they turn from their complaining ways, and they turn back to God. Moses, the good shepherd who appears haplessly stuck in the middle, talks to God about the situation, and God works out a plan. Make a poison snake. Put it on a pole. Then every person bit by a snake can look at the pole and be healed.

That bronze snake on the pole, not incidentally, has become a symbol of healthcare. The rod of Asclepius (uh·sklee·pee·uhs) harkens from ancient Greek and Egyptian mythology and has a snake twining up a pole that symbolizes healing. We see this symbol at our healthcare facilities and doctor's offices.

I think the point of this story from Numbers (or, at least *one* point), is that God is in the rescue business. God delivered the people from slavery. And, now, God rescues the people from dying of snake bites. God is in the rescue business. *Why?* Because God loves us and has mercy on us.

Jesus would remember this story early in John's Gospel. Jesus likens himself to the healing of that poison snake on a pole. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

That lifted-up-cross (and Jesus' journey to the cross) reminds us that God rescues and heals us from persecution, from slavery under the thumb of worry and despair. God rescues us from death itself. *Look at me,* Jesus seems to be saying. *Look at me and remember how God works. God brings healing. God brings hope. God walks with us through the troubles of life. Trust me,* Jesus is saying to his disciples. *God is about life. Your life. Eternal life.*

These texts are about wholeness, healing, heaven.

And these texts are about our journey with God. We are making our way across the deserts of life to a promised land. While we are on the journey, we are called to bear with each other. We are called to reach

out with God's love to our fellow travelers. We're not called to complain and grouse, but to travel with courage and humility, trusting God as we go.

God is in the rescue business, which is another way of saying God really, really loves the world and everybody in it. God is in the rescue business of redemption, care, nurture . . . Jesus invites us to join his family business. We are invited to be in the rescue/love business. We are invited to extend this caring love to our aching world. It's not just good news for us, in other words, it's good news to share. So, we receive it, but we also live it.

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Fifty-nine years ago last week, six hundred civil rights activists gathered in Alabama for a 54-mile March from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery. These folk, mostly religious Jews and Christians, were hoping to rescue our country from the grip of racism. After only six blocks into their march, on the Edmund Pettis Bridge, on what has become known as "Bloody Sunday," state and local lawmen attacked the marchers with billy clubs and tear gas. A white minister was killed. John Lewis was beaten senseless. We saw this horror from the comfort of our own homes on our television sets. The news broke in with live reports. We watched. And we were outraged. People around the country took to the streets in protest.

Two weeks later, the March from Selma made it to Montgomery. When they got there, they were 25,000 people strong. "There is no issue of States rights or national rights," said President Lyndon Johnson. "There is only the struggle for human rights." (*Writer's Almanac, retrieved March 7, 2024.*)

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Scripture teaches that Jesus came for our salvation. That word (Sozo) means healing. Wholeness. Shalom. Peace. Union with God. This is a gift of God's love we've been given, and it is a gift we are meant both to treasure and to share. The "heaven" Jesus had in mind was not just some future destination, but it was a way of living in the NOW where people are loved and welcomed and tenderly cared about.

Jesus, lifted high upon that cross, says, *Remember me. Trust my promises. Follow me. Don't stand still. Get up. Follow me. Walk with me to Selma and to Gaza and to Kiev and to Havana. Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*

AMEN.