

Sermon Title: Are there yet?

Scripture Reading: Numbers 21

Place: Nutana Park Mennonite Church (March 10)

May God's grace abound in your lives and in the life of Nutana Park/First Mennonite Church.

It is wonderful to be here, thank you for opening your worship to me and CMU!

We are grateful for the connection that Canadian Mennonite University and Nutana Park/First Mennonite Church share.

After a pandemic that hurt enrolment, there is renewed enthusiasm around campus with applications numbers the second highest in our history. We hope and pray those applications turn into students in seats in fall!

Excitement is also building around the new opportunities that beginning a new social work program will have on our university in fall. Graduates will be accredited for across Canada, so those in Saskatchewan/Alberta, can study at a Mennonite institution and return home to make a positive difference in their community.

With CMU turning 25 next year, we are creatively considering our role in the post-secondary world as a Mennonite/Christian university shaped and transformed by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Social work is the first of other new programs being considered.

We are grateful for Nutana Park/First Mennonite and your support and connection over many years. Whether you attended, take a life-long learning Xplore class, said a prayer for CMU, offered CMU as an option for a student, read our Blazer magazine or donated financially.

Whatever your connection, thank you, for your generous spirit.

Are we there yet?

It's too bad the Israelites didn't have Google maps as they journeyed from Egypt to the Promised Land. This is the meandering route it took them to get to the Promised Land over 40 years. You can understand the Israelite's impatience.

I've been on enough road trips with my boys asking, "are we there yet" to know a thing or two about impatience. They know there is something good at the end of a long road trip, a chance to see their cousins, a new campground or often the most important, a hotel with a pool and a free breakfast with sugared cereals!

Although God provided a free manna breakfast every morning, there was no hotel with a pool after a day of wandering for the Israelites. Can you imagine travelling with the same group of people for 40 years and how many times Moses heard, "are we there yet?" They had been promised that at the end of this journey would be a "land flowing with milk and honey". Their future would be better, they would possess their own land and their own freedom! But their journey seemed to never end.

Looking Back

Numbers 21 finds the Israelites well on their way to the Promised Land. This chapter begins with Israel being attacked by a Canaanite king. As usual, Israel cries out to God and God gives them victory. So, Israel is feeling good about itself, and that God's got their backs.

But the Israelites are a fickle bunch and within the next verses, we hear their whining, "are we there yet", "why is this taking so long", "we were better off in Egypt". Their impatience with the journey leads to grumbling and complaining.

“They spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” I guess the manna was sugar-free!

After many years on the road, the Israelites are still looking backwards to Egypt. In the process of glorifying their past lives in Pharaoh’s kingdom, they quickly forgot they were slaves, doing hard labour. Their time in Egypt was anything but the “glory days” they make them out to be.

The hope they once had for a promised land has been eroded by the decades long, hard journey through the desert. Impatience replaced hope and it had them looking backwards not forwards.

When things are hard in the present, and we have lost hope that our fortunes will change, we can easily slip into venerating the past; things were “better” and “greater” in the bygone years. We tend to look backwards, revising our history to see only the good; a selective memory as it were. I seem to recall only the made shots of my basketball career, while conveniently forgetting all the fouls, turnovers and missed shots.

Despair and impatience in their present situation has Israel looking to their past. Lack of positive change in our current situation, can lead to the temptation to find comfort in yesterday. Israel gazed backwards, wanting to ditch God’s future plan, and head back into the arms of Pharaoh.

Our Impatience

Its surprising how many Psalms speak of impatience with God.

Psalm 13: How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Psalm 89: How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?

These are two of many examples. Why do wilderness times take 40 years? We are supported to be a people of hope, but we are quick to turn impatient when Promised Lands don’t come as quickly as they like, our fortunes don’t change overnight, our prayers are not answered as soon as we want, resurrections take longer than we can handle. On the way to a better future, there are many deserts that test our patience and hope.

Its hard to keep looking to a better future, when the present is hard enough to bear.

Looking Down

The consequence of Israel’s impatience is snakes, lots of snakes. “Venomous snakes” say some translations. The Hebrew word means “fiery”, probably due to the burning sensation felt when bitten.

I hate snakes, probably some remnant neurosis from my childhood and hearing the story of the serpent tempting Adam and Eve. My wife and I recently spent time hiking in the deserts of Arizona and Nevada, and I realized I spent a lot of time looking at the ground; my eyes scanning the ground for anything slithering. I imagine the Israelites were gazing at the ground a lot during this period of their journey.

Repentance

Having felt the wrath of the serpents, the Israelites quickly do an about face.

“The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” They acknowledge their complaining born out of their impatience.

God instructs Moses to *“make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.”* This is strange considering it seems to break the second commandment of creating idols.

It also ironic that to receive healing from the snake bites, Israel had to look the snake in the eye. In the Egyptian and Canaanite cultural and religious life, the snake played an important role. It was understood on one hand to be a source of evil power and chaos, but snakes were also seen to have fertility, life giving and healing powers.

Gazing Inward

You could say that when the Israelites came to Moses to confess the error of their ways and plead for God to remove the snakes, they were going through the first three steps of the 12-step healing process of Alcoholics Anonymous. Admission, belief that only a higher Power can bring restoration and turn our lives over to that high Power.

And by facing the snake on a pole, God was moving them to step four, *“make a searching and fearless moral inventory of themselves.”* That’s right from the AA Handbook.

Instead of looking at the ground, the serpent on a pole forced them to face their own fickle, impatient faith. Staring in the eyes of the snake is a reckoning of sorts, a deep self examination of their frailties, flaws, and failures. It’s a moment of holding hard truths up to the light.

Repentance and reckoning are the first, and often most difficult steps to healing.

Its humbling to look at the snakes in our lives because it drives us deep into ourselves, to see the shadow sides of who we are. We are a fickle bunch just like the Israelites, our trust in God wavers, we despair, become impatient and turn away from God, as we wait for a better future. And as difficult as this is, this is the path to wholeness.

Lent is a deliberate, extended time of looking our snakes in the eyes; facing and naming the demons and darkness in us to seek healing and continue to move forward in our journey of faith.

Gazing at Jesus

In his conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, Jesus says, *“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*

Jesus replaces the serpent on a pole. When we gaze into the eyes of the suffering Christ, his beaten and bruised body, his eyes draining of life; we too are forced to confront the fickleness of our faith and the impatience of our hearts. We are the impatient Jews who sought a Saviour who would overthrow the Romans, we are the disciples who when the going got tough, abandon the faith journey they were called to.

Looking at the cross means a deep self examination of our fluttering faith. It means rummaging around the dark corners of our closet and acknowledge that we doubt that God’s kingdom is coming. Our trust that tomorrow will be better, wavers.

Patient God: The Healer

The serpent and Jesus were lifted up to bring healing and wholeness to us as we continue to journey toward a better future.

Interestingly, nowhere in our story does it say that God removed snakes, but rather provided a way of healing from their bites. As my father-in-law often said as he battled Parkinson disease, *“God is not a way out, but a way through.”*

With the snake on a pole, God provided a way of healing so Israel could move closer to their promised land. In the crucified Christ, we too find healing for our journey towards a better tomorrow.

Patient God: Hope-Giver

Not only is God one who shows patience and healing; God is also a hope-giver.

Staring at the snake lifted into the sky, forced the Israelites to look up and forward as opposed to down and backwards. It was a reminder to look ahead to the promise of a new land, with new opportunities and a new future. Their hope was renewed.

Hope is found on our Christ lifted on the cross. For we know how the story turns out, that on the other side of death, is new life, new beginnings, a new leaf is turned. Staring at the cross renews our hope so we can continue to move forward, one step at a time, despite the current wilderness that surrounds us. God is working for a better future, indeed God's kingdom continues to come.

Closing

Are we there yet?

On that wilderness pole and on the cross, our impatience is met with God's patient love. While we can be impatient with God as we wait for our personal resurrections, as we wait for a new relationship, a new job, a new lease on life, God is lovingly patient with us. The snake and Jesus are signs that God's patience knows no bounds.

As Israel's impatience, met God's patience in the eyes of the serpent. May our own moments of impatience, lack of faith and despair meet the gaze of Christ on the cross. As we gaze inward and forward, may we experience the healing and hope of Christ, to take one more step towards the future God has in store for us.