

Deep in the Wilderness: Called to Deep Healing
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
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Scripture: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:13-21

Numbers 21:4-9 (NRSV):

⁴ From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ The people spoke against God and against 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.” ⁶ Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷ 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.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” ⁹ So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3:13-21:

¹³ “No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of [Humanity]. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of [Humanity] be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “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.

¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

I want to begin today by acknowledging the anniversary of the pandemic. One year ago tomorrow, March 15th, was the last in-person worship service we held before shutting down our church building for a number of months. We already made a few awkward changes that day – no handshakes, no hymnals – but we didn’t know then what was unfolding or how this year would look: how difficult it would be, what bright spots there might be despite the very real losses. Throughout this year, we have all done a lot of thinking about sickness and health, healing and hospitals, vaccines and viruses. We may be sick of thinking about it, but our worship theme for today, “Deep in the Wilderness: Called to Deep Healing,” brings the idea of healing to our attention once again, asking, what kind of healing do we find when we’re out in the wilderness? What

kind of deep healing does God offer us? In what ways can the church be a community of healing?

In a recent Lenten reflection, historian Kate Bowler compared this pandemic experience to her own experience of being diagnosed with stage 4 cancer in her mid-30s. She remembers her first day of chemotherapy and thinking, am I going to be able to do this? Do I have any skills that are applicable to this situation at all? Am I going to be able to get through this? She says, “It feels like a very pandemic feeling to me. I don’t know how to live without a horizon for this long.” Living “without a horizon” or with so much uncertainty has been part of the challenge we’ve all been dealing with. If we had a clear end date, it would make all the sacrifices and missed time together easier, somehow. But trying to hold on without knowing when something will end – that’s hard. Maybe even as hard as that well-known Lenten image of wandering in the wilderness.

Our first Scripture passage for today comes from Numbers 21, from the time of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness after their exodus from slavery in Egypt. It’s a difficult in-between time when they are free from outright oppression but still uncertain about their future as a people. And in this horizon-less place, the people become bitter, and begin to resent Moses. They say, “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.” Now this is the second time in the book of Numbers that the Israelites are complaining – specifically complaining about the manna that God has sent to them. Imagine complaining about manna – that heavenly food that miraculously fell outside of their tents every evening, straight from God’s hands! In the first round of complaining, in Numbers 11, they make it clear that manna is apparently not good enough for them,

weeping and saying, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at” (Num. 11:4-6). Isn’t that just human nature for you – craving variety rather than the same old manna day after day after day. (That actually sounds like a pretty good grocery list, if I do say so myself!)

Well, in response to that first round of complaining – and some particularly bitter words from Moses about not being all of these peoples’ mother – God sent quails, so that the people could have meat to eat, along with the side of manna. But this second time around, God is angry – angry enough to send poisonous snakes among the Israelites, which bite people and cause many to die. When the people repent, God tells Moses the solution to this plague of snakes: place a bronze serpent on a pole, and whoever looks at it will live. So whenever someone is bitten by a snake, they look up at the bronze snake on a pole, and it works as a kind of visual anti-venom that saves their lives.

Now this story – and the theology or understanding of God reflected in it – seems quite strange to our modern ears. This God sounds vindictive and wrathful, the God of plagues and smiting. And the solution of a bronze snake on a pole seems superstitious, too magical for our sensibilities. Interestingly, though, this symbol of a snake on a pole continues to represent healing in our society on some level: it’s found on the medical symbol on everything from medic alert bracelets to ambulances, if you look closely. So this story – mixed with ancient Greek myths – remains connected to healing, even in our modern, scientific medical system. I find that fascinating.



On a spiritual level, there are two aspects of this story I want to speak to. One is, as pastor Osheta Moore observes, that this story calls us to go beyond the surface to think about what is toxic in our lives. She speaks about our brokenness and our

“brokenheartedness,” saying, “Sometimes our brokenheartedness, if it’s not treated, can be as venomous, as toxic as a snake bite. That’s why the church as a healing community is so important. We should not be a community where we hold our brokenness in, where we’re too afraid of sharing it with each other. [It’s important] that we get that toxicity out of ourselves and that we share it with each other. Because when we share our stories, when we speak truth to each other, when we pray for one another, when we show up when we need each other, then we’re bringing a curative, healing property to our brokenness.”¹ And this relates to the second important aspect of the story. Notice that when the people cry out to God, God does not take away the snakes entirely, or even stop them from biting! No, God does not solve the problem of the snakes for the people, but does provide a way for them to survive it: through the bronze snake raised up among them, a beacon of healing in a time of fear and grief and woundedness. In this way, God does not take away the brokenness or brokenheartedness, but does offer deep healing.

¹ Osheta Moore, “Healing Community: There’s a Balm in Gilead” (sermon), Roots Covenant Church, St. Paul, MN, <https://rootscov.org/sermons/healing-community/>

Our second Scripture passage for today adds another layer of symbolism to this bronze snake raised up in the desert: it connects it with the cross of Jesus. In this well-known passage from John 3 (how many of you have seen verse 16 on a plaque somewhere?), there are references to direction that are unique to the Gospel of John, which is a more mystical gospel that emphasizes Jesus' divine nature through rich theological metaphors. This is the Gospel that has all those "I am" sayings of Jesus', for example. Part of the symbolism that John uses has to do with descent and ascent, and we see this in our passage for today. So Jesus, as the Word of God, has "descended from heaven," and must now ascend or "be lifted up" on the cross. John says, "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of [Humanity] be lifted up, 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" (v. 14-16). We see here that in John, the crucified Christ becomes the healing serpent, lifted up, offering not condemnation, but salvation, healing, eternal life. And, I might add, that this offering is not limited to the moment of the cross, as we might assume. Jesus was not born to die, but his death was in continuity with the way that he lived and related to people and taught throughout his ministry: it was a revelation of God's love, of Emmanuel, God with us, even in loss and death. Jesus' whole life, ministry, death, and resurrection reflected that "God so loved the world" – this is why God sent Jesus into the world (v. 16-17).

Coming back to pastor Osheta Moore, this is why Jesus has been called a "Wounded Healer." As the Divine Son who experienced the fullness of human life, from

woundedness and suffering, thirst and death to joy and connection, peace and delight, Jesus was fully human, with all the vulnerabilities that involves – all the brokenness and brokenheartedness. And because of that incarnation, we know that we can experience healing not despite our humanity, but in the midst of it. Like Jesus, we can be wounded healers, using ordinary things – mud and spit and touch – to heal. We are in fact called as the church to be a community of wounded healers, to the point that there is a tradition of speaking about the church as a hospital for wounded souls.

As we continue to make our way through this particular wilderness of Lent during a pandemic, we may be feeling weary and worn down, tired of the same “manna” day after day after day, with no clear horizon in sight. We may be feeling caught between the “already-but-not-yet” of vaccinations, or the joy of already being vaccinated but having loved ones still waiting. We may be thinking about all of the different aspects of this traumatic experience from which we need healing. In the midst of this, let’s remember that Jesus, the Wounded Healer, is with us, and shows us that even in our broken and broken-hearted state, we can be healed and offer healing to one another. We can be a healing community centred around the love of God, who lifts up our hearts and shows to us a life-giving way through the wilderness – the way of God’s Shalom: “our wholeness, our healing, our flourishing.”²

I close with an ancient Celtic blessing about Christ, our Wounded Healer:

May the Christ who walks on wounded feet
walk with you on the road.

May the Christ who serves with wounded hands
stretch out your hands to serve.

May the Christ who loves with a wounded heart
open your heart to love.

May you see the face of Christ in everyone you meet,
and may everyone you meet see the face of Christ in you. **AMEN**

² Moore, “Healing Community” sermon.