



The Rev. Emily Williams Guffey

Sermon for March 14, 2021

The Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3,17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

It has been a year since the pandemic began. How do we measure it?

In birdsong, in house cleans, in sweatpants, in sourdough loaves?

In Zoom squares, in take-out, in walks, in naps?

In air hugs, in hair grown, in pounds gained, in phone calls?

In anxiety, exhaustion, and losses innumerable, ambiguous, and abject.

In horror, compounding; in stress, and in strength.

In fragility, fear, and faith.¹

Our psalms say that “the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom”² Not to be afraid of God so as to stay away, but to be so rightfully in awe of the divine power that creates and sustains our being, and redeems us - despite ourselves - into abundant life. To be aware that we are not in control, despite pervasive illusions and desires to the contrary.

Throughout this past year, amid our rightful, visceral fears of venom, violence, and the virus, I am certain that we have grown in our visceral fear of God. I am sure that we know more really, physically now than we ever have how minute we are, how connected we are; we know that we rise and fall by the same air, the same breath, the same spirit.

With illusions and “normalcy” stripped away, we have had little to view but fear. (And Netflix.) We have doomscrolled - we read and watch more news to learn how to stay safe, sure that our shared reality is getting worse, by the article, by the segment. We have looked fear in the face - and on the screen - a lot. We have complained. We have lamented. And here we are.

Out in their own wilderness, the Israelites complained a lot, too.³ Their repeated refrain to Moses is, “Why have you led us out here, where we don’t have enough, where it’s scary, uncomfortable, and lonely? We want to go back, we want to go back to how it was, and what we know.”

¹ Echoing the song “Seasons of Love” by Jonathan Larson from the musical *Rent*, 1996

² See Psalm 111:10 and Proverbs 1:7, 9:10

³ See Exodus 15:22-25, 16:2-3, 17:3; Numbers 11:4-6

In today's story from Numbers, we hear their final refrain--this time, and for the first time, directed not just to Moses but also to God. They sputter with weary anger, "This "virtual" stuff is not enough! Where is the real food, where is the true comfort?"

And then, the Lord sends poisonous serpents among them, and these snakes bite people, and many of them die.

It's a bizarre and seemingly heartless move. Why would the Lord send objects of rightful fear--snakes! lethal ones! --into their midst? In any case, it proves effective, because the people swiftly approach Moses, saying, "'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prays for the people. And the Lord says to Moses, "Make a poisonous snake out of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a snake bites someone, that person should look at the serpent of bronze and live."

The weirdness does not relent here. This story endures in mystery, and in dearth of tidy explanation. Considering the fear that snakes instill in us, and have always instilled in us biologically and culturally, I wonder if a current analogy would be to put a really large image of a coronavirus--the ball with the spikes--on a stick.

I know, it's weird -- but here's the thing, and perhaps the continuing genius of God amidst their - and our - sorrow: God commanded them to fashion that of which they were most afraid, and had good reason to be, and to make it in a big way, shining and glittering and impossible to ignore. It's a bold way to name fear, which puts it outside of you, where you can behold it for what it is.

Fear wants to rule inside of us; it wants to govern our feelings, our behaviors, our words, and even our physical condition. And it stays that way because we think that talking about it will make it worse, when in fact the opposite is true. We are so used to living in fear, personally and socially, that we are complacent, if not comfortable, in constant "fight or flight" response. Yet, such constant stress is not all there is. God sent his Son that we might be saved and safe, that we might have life and have it to the full. The first step toward full, free life is naming that of which we are afraid, and which we grieve.

John compares Moses' serpent on a stick to the cross: the cross, where Jesus died a gruesome, unwarranted death, which definitely looked like the end, not only of his life but their hope. It changed everything...

... because it was not the end. The grace upon which we live, the grace which has brought us safe this far through immeasurable dangers, toils, and snares of this year and many years before that is that when all is lost, God still holds us in life. Our fears do not hold a candle to the life that God intends for us. And so, at the very foot of the cross, with our fears vividly and inexorably before us, freedom blossoms, and new life begins.