

Sermon for Lent 4

Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-21

Have you ever had one of those dreams that fill you with anxiety?

I'm sure you know the ones I'm talking about. You're in school or at work, when you realize that you are completely unprepared. Maybe it's a presentation you are supposed to give or a test you have to take. You arrive for the day and the teacher announces that it's your final exam. But you have no idea what the material is. And you panic. This is something that would likely never happen in our waking lives. But at night, in our sleeping mind, we have somehow missed all the classes or forgot completely about some responsibility we were given. You can feel the tension and anxiety building up as you try to still pull it off without the knowledge or tools you need. We wake, sloughing off the troubled feelings, relieved that it was only a dream.

But what about when we feel unprepared and unequipped for our waking days?

If you remember a few weeks back on the first Sunday of Lent, I suggested a roadmap for us to follow in our journey with Christ through these 40 days.

We are Claimed, Driven, Tested and Sent into the world to Proclaim Christ crucified and risen. A couple of weeks ago, Pastor Jon reminded us that our identity is tied up in the promise that we are claimed by God in an amazing act of grace. Pastor Frank reminded us last week that our faith drives us outward toward self-sacrifice for the sake of the most vulnerable. This week I'm reflecting on what it means that we are tested as people of faith.

Many of you are probably thinking that this is the easiest one of the four to understand. Who hasn't at some point in our lives felt tested by struggles and challenges we didn't ask for? I know many of you are facing those right now. And often when we face these times of trial we feel helpless. Unsure of what to do that would alleviate the suffering, whether our own or that of another. And reckoning with the truth that sometimes there is little we can do to change a situation. At least in the way we would want to change it. Which feels discouraging and unfair. And not at all what we imagine God wants for the people God loves. So, there is a cognitive dissonance for us who are on this journey with Christ. Testing might be the easiest for us to wrap our heads around in the abstract. But the reality of being tested is also the hardest for us to reconcile with our hope in having been claimed by God.

We can identify then with those early Israelites, following Moses through the wilderness to some unknown, unseen promised land. Moses, who told them that by following him, they were really following God. And if they endured, they would see a

land flowing with milk and honey. No longer enslaved like they were before, but free in the most profound sense of the word. But along the way...remember it would be 40 long years of enduring...they couldn't understand the suffering and struggle of their freedom. God had freed them from oppression and enslavement, but they fell into the trap of their very human lives. They became impatient to reach the end of their wandering. They were discontent with just having enough of their needs satisfied. They wanted more and better. They resorted to complaints and speaking against even the ones who had freed them in the first place. No longer able to see the great gift of freedom they had received from God.

Life and our humanity does that to us. We easily overlook the presence of God and the gift of grace we have been given. Particularly when life becomes difficult and we want what we want. I mean, imagine 40 years of wilderness! We are just coming up to the year anniversary of our last worship service in the sanctuary at St. John's. A year of pandemic. Of wearing masks and social distancing. Of a great shift in life as we knew it to be. And along the way we have seen a collective humanity that at times has loved darkness more than light. We have become impatient with our families during this extended time of being isolated from others. Expressing anger and frustration in ways that are not life-giving. And in our feelings of insecurity and helplessness, we have sought to place blame on others for something that no one in this world wished upon anyone. So, this pandemic has become politicized, with both sides accusing the other of handling things badly. And we continue to see increases in anti-Asian violence and discrimination that is not justified by reality but by our own sin.

God's response is to take the means of our sickness and make it a symbol of our salvation. So, Moses lifts up the poison on a pole for the people to see in stark plainness. And in being able to really see it, they found healing.

In times of our testing, honest assessments of where we have been and where we wish to be, can help us move through them. To really look at what is broken and acknowledge it without secrecy and trying to keep it hidden. Bringing to light our failures, faults and fears is the way we can learn to meet them head-on. And we can make different choices, living into the freedom God promises us in Christ.

The language many Christians use about prayer is that we lift things up to God. And I think in these times of testing, this is exactly what can help us through it. To lift up honestly where we are struggling. To confess where we are broken and in need of healing. To express the anguish and confusion we feel in the midst of a wandering time of wilderness. And not only to lift up our individual sins but to lift up the collective Sin that can poison us all.

But in the end it is not our ability to lift up our sins that saves us. It is God's power to lift us up from those sins.

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so God lifts up Jesus for the world to see.

And what do we see?

The wounded body of an innocent person.

The unjust suffering of those at the mercy of the powers.

The loss of life that was expendable to the people who cry out for execution.

One who was derided and spat upon and on the receiving end of violence done by those who blamed him for stirring up trouble.

Ultimately, we see our own brokenness, the broken body of all humanity.

Both in the reality that we suffer and die. But also the weight of our transgression of all that God hopes for the world.

But that is not all we see. Because that broken body on the cross is God's body. God who chose to take the poisonous nature of sin into God's own self. To be on the receiving end of the testing we all face. To endure the wilderness, abandonment and isolation with us and on our behalf. So that we might be given the means to life that has no end.

Being tested in the midst of life is part of what it means to be human. And we can feel unequipped for enduring the struggle. But God has given us the means to move through our pain and fear toward the freedom that only Christ can give.