

“Journey to Freedom”

March 10, 2024

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Numbers 21:4-9

As you have picked up by now, our theme through Lent is Journeying to the Cross with Jesus. It has been the focus of our Lenten Meditations, the last few sermons, and of course, in ultimate subtly, our visual up here. Jesus' journey to the cross is an epic one in that He knows what is going to happen to Him when He gets to Jerusalem, but He goes anyway. He goes knowing the path He blazes will be the path we get to follow – follow all the way to resurrection and eternity. When it comes to following Jesus on this path, we have used a couple images along the way. Jesus said, “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” In those words we heard the need to make a choice, and make it daily. To choose to deny the part of ourselves that lives for this world and its priorities of selfishness – longing to be prosperous, strong, successful and influential. To deny the call of that world and live for the Kingdom Jesus established where the greatest of all is the servant of all and you are known not by what you have, but by what you give away – love, affirmation, encouragement, money, food, acceptance, compassion. “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Last week Paul identified the journey as a journey of foolishness and wisdom in which we leave the foolishness of those who are perishing – even though it feels like wisdom – and buy into the saving power of God on earth – even though it feels like foolishness?

But this is not the only time God has called God's people to make an epic journey. It was after God heard His people cry-out that God freed the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. God brought the most powerful nation in the world to its knees, then lead His people from Egypt to the Promise Land. It was an epic journey that took a whole generation to complete – a journey that transformed them from freed Egyptian slaves to God's own people. So, what can we learn from their journey to help us with ours? Or more specifically, what does the part of the journey recorded in Number 21 have to teach us about our journey?

Well, the first thing we learn is it's not just us. Personally, I get so frustrated as I find myself flip-flopping back and forth between this world and God's Kingdom. One minute I am doing well. I have budgeted to keep up my church pledge and give a good among to Week of Compassion. I have been in worship, even spent some time in prayer. I have been a gift to a stranger in the grocery store and brought a smile to someone's face who needed a smile. I am doing well, choosing to be a servant, giving myself away to those I care for and even those I don't know. Then the next minute I get sucked into reading an article about one of our Presidential nominees and I get angry, I start to panic, I start to pull-in because I need to save my resources, save my energy, save whatever I have in order to prepare for what is coming. It is

so frustrating. One minute I am picking up my cross and the next I am throwing it down. One minute I am grabbing ahold of God's wisdom and the next I am clinging to this world's foolishness. Well, I am not alone. It is not just me. In the 3 verses before our reading, God's people are attacked by one of the local kings who saw them as easy pickings, and several of Israel's people were captured. The people prayed to God, asked for God's help, dedicated themselves and the battle to God. As a result, the next day's victory was total and complete. All of Israel rejoiced in the power of God who brought victory to God's people. After the great victory, as they continue on their journey, it takes a total of one half of one verse before the flip-flop. The second half of verse 4 and into 5, "the people became discouraged on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?'" It took half of one verse to move from singing God's praises to becoming discouraged and complaining. It's not just me. I think every denomination, every church, every family has a back to Egypt committee. They say we need to go back to the way it was before the pandemic. We need to go back and only sing the songs we did when everyone agreed on what the good songs were. We need to go back to when most women stayed home during the day and were available for more church activities. We need to go back to the good old days when people really knew their neighbors and folks could rely on each other. You know, back in the depression. Yea, we all have a back to Egypt committee to remember the past and remember it way better than it was. And they are not helpful in the journey. We can't go back. We need to go where God is leading us now. It is a journey, and all this flip-flopping between moving forward and wanting to go back is not helpful. It is good to know I am not the only one, but it still isn't helpful.

The second thing we learn is reality bites. It might be partially your fault, it might not be, but there will be painful obstacles along the way. I know not every person following Moses out of Egypt moved from praise to discouragement in half a verse. Many would rather starve to death in the wilderness than go back to slavery in Egypt. But enough people did that they recognized the poisonous snakes in their path as punishment. The snakes were biting people, and the people were dying. Starting in verse 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. 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.'" Notice, the people wanted the snakes removed, but that is not what God did. God didn't remove them but made a way through them. People were still getting bitten. People still experience the pain of the bite and the fire of the poison entering their body. Reality bites. Whether it is partially our fault or not, these obstacles are here, we are going to feel the sting. The sting of hunger, the sting of sickness, the sting of broken relationships, the sting of death. The sting of feeling like a fool when we are doing it right. The sting of watching others get what the earthly part of us really wants even though they are selfish morons. Yeah, that is the second thing we learn. There is pain along this journey, and it isn't always our fault.

But the third thing we learn is if we lift up our eyes, we will make it through. God told Moses to, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” Well, Moses did. Verse 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.” To live, you needed to take your focus off of the problem, away from what you can do, long enough to look up at the healing God provided. Foolishness, yes. And for those who knew they had this under control and refused to look up, they died. But those foolish enough to trust God’s ways, they lived. As last week’s reading from 1 Corinthians said, “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” Lift up your eyes and you will make it through. God renews that promise in the 3rd chapter of John’s Gospel. Starting in verse 14, “And 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. 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 everlasting life.”

This journey we are on – not only the journey to the cross but the journey of life – it’s hard. Some of the pain we bring on ourselves, some of it we don’t. But for those who are foolish enough to follow Jesus, to become a servant, to give themselves away for others, to look up for healing; they will make it through. Through the sting of hunger, through the sting of sickness, through the sting of broken relationships, through the sting of death. They will not perish but have everlasting life.

Mike Van Heyningen