

Lent 4, 14 March 2021
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21
Called to DEEP Healing
First Mennonite Church

All of us have heard these stories about how God's people became God's people. God's people started off as slaves in the land of Egypt. For generations and generations, they were slaves in Egypt. Day after day, year after year, generation and after generation, God's people made bricks for Pharaoh.

And then it happened—the great escape. One day they were making bricks for Pharaoh, and the next, they were walking away from the pyramids and the Nile River, onwards to the Promised Land. Moses was God's

chosen leader. A staff in his hand and sandals on his feet, Moses led the slaves through the wilderness towards the Promised Land.

Now the journey from slavery to the promised land was no walk in the park. It was a long, arduous, 40-year trek. This was no journey for sissies; you really had to want it bad. You had to want your freedom so bad that you were willing to travel for 40 years with just a shirt on your back. You really needed an imagination because there were no postcards or travel brochures about the Promised Land. You really had to trust God.

And so off they went on their trek to the Promised Land. You can read all about the journey. We have it recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Amazing wilderness stories with God.

And like all journeys that you and I have taken in our life, there were problems. It was not all a party. Just read the stories about their trek through the wilderness—my, there was a lot of mumbling, a lot of murmuring, a lot of grumbling, a lot of whining.



I lived in Beijing for years. During the spring, the winds from out west in the Gobi Desert would blow and cover the city in fine yellow sand. If you were outside, it didn't take long until the hair on your head was stiff from all the tiny particles of

sand that settled on your head. It felt gross. If you didn't wear a mask, sometimes your lungs would hurt. One evening I was outside, and it started to rain. It rained mud! Imagine, day after day, all that wilderness sand blowing on your food, blowing into your tent, up your nose, and into your ears. All that sand in the wilderness, with no relief or end in sight—it could get under the skin of even the most devoted, the most faithful of us!



In the previous chapter, we found this raggedy band of escaped slaves attempting a short cut through Moab via the king's highway, the main trade route at that time, to the Promised Land. The Moabites refused to let them travel through, which meant a lengthy detour. More wandering in the desert. More sand in their hair and on their food. More of the same meals of manna and quails. More disappointment. More anger. More complaining. More mumbling. More negativity. More toxicity.

This manna they got every day—well, just listen to the words they used: they said, **the food was miserable!** They complained against Moses because he was the leader. They complained against God for delivering them from bondage in Egypt saying, “we wish we were back in Egypt!” At least if we died there, we'd have a cemetery marker to mark the place where we died.

Moses must have been at wits end with all the complaints against him. It wasn't his fault that the short cut wasn't available. But he was a convenient culprit. Finding a culprit to blame is an unproductive but widely practiced way of handling difficulties. For Israel, the culprit was Moses. For us, it's often our politicians.

Israel's act of shifting the blame on to Moses also had another dimension. It meant interpreting the events experienced as human-like caused, to the exclusion of God's leading. Finding a culprit can easily mean taking a matter out of God's hands, so to speak. It's one way of rejecting faith.

The complaint against God meant they no longer wanted to be free, no longer wanted to be God's people. They wanted to return to their lives as slaves, return to a life where they were the property of Pharaoh.

Have you ever had nostalgia? This is also a widespread but unproductive coping mechanism for handling a difficult present. Instead of being grateful for the good we have, or trying to improve what needs improving, we wallow in remembering the good old times. Reminiscing is a wonderful human capacity. But there is a sentimental nostalgia that endows the past with a perfection it never had, and thereby weakens our capacity for facing the present positively. We hear it in barbershops, coffeeshops, and read it in letters to the editor, among other places: *nothing is good anymore, the way it used to be*. This is another way that can lead to rejecting faith.

And what was the result of all that complaining, grumbling, whining, and wallowing in our self-pity? Poisonous snakes. Not any old snake but poison ones that could bite and kill. The camp was overrun with poisonous snakes. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. People died by the dozens.

And what did they do? The congregation came to Moses and said: We are sorry. Please tell God we are sorry. Please tell God to take the snakes away. And Moses prayed for the people. And we are told God heard and God answered.

It's just like God to give a surprising answer, so surprising that it surprised me, and I bet, you will be surprised too! God told Moses to take one of those bronze vessels and hammer it into a serpent, an image of a serpent. And I can hear it. Can you hear it? Bang. Bang. Can you hear it out in the desert? Bang. Bang. I bet Moses used a rock to bash on that bronze vessel. Flattening it, shaping it into the image of a serpent. Can you hear it? Bang, bang, bang. He's making medicine! I imagine the image Moses is making is just like the image the ancient Greek doctors used, which



was then passed down through the centuries to become the emblem of

medical associations around the world. Do you hear it? Do you know what it sounds like? It sounds like nails on a cross.

He's hammering and shaping the vessel into an image of a serpent. And God says, "tie that image on a pole." I can see him tying the image on his staff. And hold it up high and walk around the camp. And anyone who looks at that at that bronze serpent on a pole will be saved from the snake bite.

Can you see it? I don't know about you, but I see something that looks a lot like an ambulance, sounds a lot like an ambulance siren wailing through the camp. Look up! Look up! Look up! And if you were able to tear yourself away from looking around for all the snakes and look up to see the image of the bronze serpent on the pole, you would live.

Just look up and you will live. Sounds easy doesn't it? But I'll tell you, **this is the hardest thing ever**. It's so extremely hard to take your eyes off the serpent. You know, your reptile brain is on alert. Red alert. Fight or flight—mainly flight! You can hear them slithering around on top of all that sand. Even when someone says, look up, you can't. It's almost hypnotic, that bite. Watching it swell. O Lord, I can't take my eyes off that snake bite.

You know we're not just talking about snake bites. Can I go a little bit further here? I'll tell you, I'm thinking about things your mum said or didn't say to you when you were young—snake bite. Or the things you father did or didn't do—snake bite. I'm thinking of how horrible you felt about yourself when you were bullied in school. I'm thinking of all the verbal, physical, and sexual abuse those young indigenous children experienced in the residential school system, and the deep, deep wounds of a generation. I'm thinking of untold grief we experience when someone we love dies. I'm thinking about our profound disappointments and painful regrets. I'm thinking about all the hurtful and painful experiences we experience in our desert journey—snake bite.

I know when I get hurt and disappointed and I just seem to be hypnotized by that bite. The power it has over me. And I keep telling myself that same old story over and over and over again. And I just can't look up! I can't imagine what healing would look like. I can't imagine myself being more than that bite.

Look up, says the siren.

What a powerful story.

After the people of Israel arrived and settled in the Promised Land, they told this story to each other and to their children. Generation after generation told this story over and over until the generation when Jesus was born. And Jesus heard that story. Jesus knew that story.

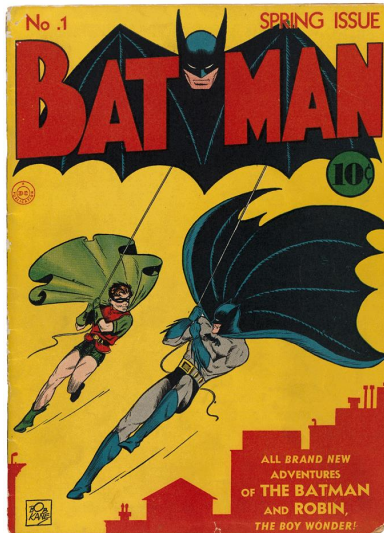
And then when we hear that story in John 3 about how a visitor comes knocking on Jesus's door. Nicodemus is a religious leader. He has all the degrees and qualifications of a religious leader, so I know he knows this story too.

Nicodemus has been bitten. I don't know what's bitten him, but he comes at night looking for an antidote. And asks Jesus. And during their curious discussion Jesus reaches back and tells the story of Moses lifting up the snake on the pole to heal the people and tells him God is going to do something similar.

You see, God journeyed with God's people through the wilderness. God continued to be faithful after they entered and lived in the Promised Land by sending prophets to remind people of God's promises and to point people in the direction of life. God continued to be faithful even when Israel was not. Finally, because God loved the world so much that God came in the person of Jesus, a living expression of God. In the person of Jesus, we could finally see God, hear what God had to say to us, touch God, and see what God was like.

You have to wonder if all the grumbling and complaining hadn't created such a spirit of negativity and cynicism that our eyes were shut to see God in front of us, our hearts were hardened so that we couldn't experience anything new from God. And we didn't like what we heard or touched or saw or experienced. The healing, the reconciliation, the salvation God offered to us in the person of Jesus was not what we expected, so we lifted Jesus up on a cross, a type of execution meant for criminals, terrorists, and political revolutionaries.

The cross. God took this instrument of torture and death, the very thing we used to kill God, the very thing that kill us—turned it upside down, and used it for **our healing, reconciliation, and salvation**. Tear your eyes away from your snake bites and look death in the eye. **Healing requires us to look directly at the very thing that is making us sick and causing us pain.**



Do any of you like Marvel comics? One of the more famous ones is Batman. Even though Batman is one of the superheroes, he has no superpowers. He's like you and me except he has a few more resources and maybe more courage. But, have you ever wondered why Batman wear a bat costume and drives around in a Batmobile? Batman is a bat because he's afraid of bats. That's his greatest fear. He looks his fear in the eye, embraces his greatest fear.

God used an instrument of torture and death us to bring us healing and salvation. Look up.

Alcoholics who seek healing from their addiction to alcohol often attend Alcoholics Anonymous. The two men who started AA were alcoholics themselves who applied what they had learnt and experienced as addicts to help other alcoholics become sober and recover from their addictions. Those who want healing must look up at their addiction.



Divorced people are often the best marriage counsellors. They know what it's like to look up from the causes of broken marriages and look at it directly in the eye. They can often spot a troubled marriage and address potential issues before others can. Some congregations have called divorced people to be deacons.

Some of the best people who can help others overcome their grief at the death of a loved one are the very ones who have experienced their own profound grief.

In his book, *Wounded Healers*, Henri Nouwen, a Catholic theologian, said:

Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not "How can we hide our wounds?" so we don't have to be embarrassed, but "How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?" When our wounds cease to

be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.

Deep healing. We are called to deep healing. It's so hard to look up. Those bites are so painful and poisonous. We don't want it to happen again, so we watch out for those snakes. Once bitten, twice shy, we say. Perhaps, if you could look up and consider the possibility of who you could be. You, personally. We, as a church. We, as a people. Look up from our fears and disappointments. Look up. God wants to heal us. Look up. Thanks be to God. Amen