

March 14, 2021
The Fourth Sunday in Lent
Year B
Numbers 21:4-9
John 3:14-21
Zoom Worship During the Coronavirus Pandemic
Commemoration of the Lockdown/Pandemic Anniversary
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

It Has Been a Hard, Hard Year

An argument could be made that we couldn't have a worse first reading on this day, when we are remembering; acknowledging the one-year mark of the Coronavirus Pandemic. It's been one year since the pandemic officially began; since it was officially called a pandemic. And we all have our stories. Stories of how we realized that things were about to change, that our lives were not going to proceed as usual. Stories where we were when we learned that school was going to be cancelled for a week, for three weeks, for months, for the rest of the year. Stories about children's initial jubilation about not having to go to school the next day turning into grief and loss as they were separated from teachers, from friends, from activities that they loved. Stories about not being able to find toilet paper or other essentials in the stores. Stories about stocking up with a month's worth of groceries, believing that that would keep us going until the crisis was over and then stories about realizing that those groceries were running out and we were nowhere close to the end of the crisis. Stories about being afraid, being in shock, being alone.

Two days ago, March 12th was the anniversary of when we made the decision to shut down in person worship services, we thought then, "for a few weeks" until things got under control again. The first Sunday when we did not worship together in person was March 15th, one year ago tomorrow. I was sure that we would be back by Easter 2020. I had no idea what we were dealing with. I was living week to week, Sunday to Sunday. As the pandemic continued, as some of the shock wore

off, we all started to function a bit more. We learned to shift and adapt, in every aspect of our lives, to make our lives fit the new reality of the pandemic.

But here we are, a year later, looking at a second Zoom Easter. There is hope on the horizon, vaccines being distributed, case numbers going down, but still 34 people died of Covid-19 just in Massachusetts, just yesterday. 34 people, leaving behind them 34 grieving families, 34 grieving communities. Just yesterday. The decline in numbers is good news, but if we remember that each of those numbers represents a person and every person that person touched in his or her life or during his or her illness, or in his or her death, it's clear that this crisis isn't over, the end might be in sight, but we're not there yet.

And what is the word from the Old Testament that we have for today, confronting as we pause to mourn, pause to remember, pause to take in the staggering losses that we have all suffered in this past year because of a disease, whether those losses have been big or small? We have a story about God sending deadly serpents into the midst of God's own people, the Israelites who were wandering in the wilderness, making their slow way to the promised land.

Of course, the people were complaining. There's a lot of complaining in the stories of the wilderness wandering of the people in the desert. They were impatient with how long the journey was taking. They were tired of the food that God had given them to eat, manna, bread from heaven in the morning, and quail, meat to eat in the evening. Water had poured from rocks to sustain them, bread had risen up from the ground to feed them, but still, they said, "Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water and we detest this miserable food" (Numbers 21:5).

The next words in the reading are: Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died (Numbers 21:6).

The text does not explicitly state that there was a cause and effect, like: the people complained, the people were ungrateful, therefore God sent serpents to kill them, but that's clearly how the people of Israel themselves interpreted the situation. This is what they said in response to the serpents:

The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take the serpents away from us" (Numbers 21:7).

Whether it was true or not, they believed that the serpents had been sent as a punishment for their lack of gratitude, for their lack of faith, for the fact that they spoken against the Lord.

There are certainly people who have brought the same kind of cause-and-effect theology to the Coronavirus pandemic. There are always those who jump in during every kind of natural disaster, no matter the scope of the human suffering, to hypothesize about why the people who are suffering deserve to be suffering. In their thinking, people sinned and therefore God sent suffering to them. A quick internet search can find those people, preaching this poisonous message, perhaps more poisonous than a serpent's bite, being interviewed on television or posting their sermons on the internet or writing articles for magazines or newspapers.

Let me be clear in saying that this is not the theology of this pastor or of this church. We look to Jesus and we see Jesus, God with us, God made flesh, suffering for people not causing people to suffer. In our gospel reading for today, Jesus equates himself, not with the serpents who bit and killed the people in what they believed was retribution for their sin, but with the serpent that was lifted up over them in the desert for their healing.

In our Old Testament reading, God gave the people a cure for the bite of the serpents in a serpent made of bronze and lifted up on a pole, so that people could

look on it and live. That is what Jesus says that he is, not an instrument of punishment, but an instrument of healing and salvation. Jesus says, “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” (John 3:14-15). The reference to being “lifted up” refers to being lifted up on a cross. Jesus is saying that in his own suffering at the hands of his own creation, his own creatures, he has become the thing, the one that people can look upon and live.

If God wanted to be a God who drew people close with wrath, who gathered people together through fear, who chose to interact with people through punishment, then we would have a very different Bible than the Bible that we do have. Even in the Old Testament, we find God bringing mercy and healing to disobedient people, and certainly in the story of Jesus, we find Jesus entering a broken world and rather than condemning it, loving it back to life, even as it lifted him up on the cross.

Certainly, we have suffered during this past year. Death has been our constant companion. I asked for your stories and I’m grateful to everyone who shared them, about the challenges that you have faced during this year.

First and foremost, I have heard from people who have lost their loved ones to Covid-19, people in our own congregation who have lost a husband, a father, a grandfather, a brother, a cousin, and so many friends, friends from church, friends from childhood.

There has been the excruciating pain of not being able to be with loved ones as they died, not being able to hold their hands, to see their faces, to tell them stories or sing them songs, or to show them our tears, or to say goodbye. The loss of this ability to say goodbye has added insult to the injury of death.

And for everyone who has lost someone to during this time whether it is to Covid-19 or to some other cause, the pandemic has affected every part about how we say goodbye and how we mourn. Families have not been able to gather, friends have not been able to visit, funerals have not been able to be held. We have not been able to gather in Kask Hall, the way we normally would, to comfort each other, to tell stories over plates of sandwiches and chips, and brownies and cookies. We have missed so many of the rituals that we take for granted when someone we love has died that help us all to remember that we're not alone, even in the face of death.

Death has been the biggest kind of suffering in this year, happening in numbers to which we dare not grow numb, but it has not been the only kind of suffering. People have gone months or a year or more, without seeing their extended family. People have been distanced from friends and even from local family. Milestone events have been cancelled or moved online. Students and teachers at every level of education have struggled with online school. Children have missed sports seasons and camp experiences. Certainly, people have missed opportunities to travel. People have been isolated, especially people who live alone, and people who have been locked down with their families have struggled with the challenges of always being together, working from home, schooling from home, being together so much has, at times, strained relationships. Political unrest and upheaval have caused worry and grief. People have lost jobs and businesses have closed. People have struggled to feed their families, demand on food pantries has grown exponentially, and people have struggled with the daily stress and anxiety of financial insecurity and uncertainty.

It has been a hard, hard year.

And yet, with all of that, all of the ways in which we have struggled and suffered this year, when I asked people to tell me their stories of this year of

pandemic and lockdown, stories of suffering and struggle were not the only stories that people had to share.

People told me other stories, about the blessing of online worship, enabling them to contribute creatively and meaningfully to a different kind of worship experience and enabling them to attend church with a much loved though far away community of faith. People told me stories about being able to be creative during so much alone time, painting, drawing, making quilt tops, organizing pictures and making scrapbooks, making and sending cards to people who were alone, making masks for medical staff and for Lutheran World Relief, and homeless shelters. People told me about the blessing of learning to use technology that was new to them to keep in touch with distanced family and friends. People told me about using this time to learn a new skill or to teach children how to do something new. We have one family that baked a weekly cake in the early months of the pandemic, having time to tackle new and challenging recipes, because their schedules were freer than they have ever been.

In the midst of so much struggling and suffering, we have seen people rise to the challenges of these days and even find unexpected blessings in them.

Have you ever kept a gratitude journal? I've known people who have kept them for years and I know that for those people it has been a meaningful spiritual practice, to pause, often at night before they go to sleep, to take note, of the things that they are grateful for from that day.

I have a friend who has been doing this for ten years. Faithfully, every day, she has written down five things that she is grateful for from that day. She now has a resource of more than 18,000 notes to herself about ways that she was blessed over the last ten years. She made gratitude notes on her best days; on days when it was easy for her to feel grateful and hard to limit herself to five things to write down. She made gratitude notes on her worst days, on days when it was hard to

feel grateful, on days when, without her intentional, daily practice of focusing on her blessings it might have been easy for her to say that nothing good happened. One of the things that she was recently grateful for, which she shared publicly, was her own personal record of gratitude, the resource that she had created for herself, that, according to her faith, helped her to see the goodness of God in her life.

Even on the hardest days, even during the hardest times, even when the serpents are biting God has not abandoned us. God is with us to bring us life, to bring us healing, to bring us salvation. This has been a hard time and it's not over yet. But through it all, God has been with us, not afflicting us, but supporting us, surprising us with unexpected blessings and silver linings, suffering with us and for us, and giving us salvation. Thanks be to God. Amen.