

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 14, 2021

Readings: [Numbers 21:4-9](#); [Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22](#); [Ephesians 2:1-10](#); [John 3:14-21](#)

Believing

It is hard to reconcile the God in today's Old Testament lesson with the God in today's Gospel. In one story, he "sent poisonous serpents among the people," and in another story, he "so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." On the one hand, we hear of a God who is weary of the never-ending whining of those he has chosen to be his own. He is tired of their complaining and carping and sends a slithering strike team to take the people out. On the other hand, God's love for his people and his desire to be among them is so powerful that he offers his son to guide them to eternal salvation.

What is interesting is that the people in these stories do not change much. Having recently been given their freedom from an oppressive enslaved existence, the Israelites soon let their fear of the unknown drive them to speak against their liberator. You can almost hear them saying, "We would rather go back to the awful life we had instead of some promised future with you." It is a devil you know decision-making strategy.

The evildoers in the Gospel are no further along in their spiritual development. Shying away from the light of Christ, some prefer to wallow in the darkness of their

deeds, fearful that God will see their sinful lives for what they are. Only the bravest ones will shed their fear and walk to the light when they understand the gift they have received and embrace it.

What does one do with these stories? Perhaps we should first look at how stories help us to make sense of the world. I do not remember where I read this information as I have seen it in many different places. However, it has been said that our brains spin stories or narratives to help us understand what is happening. When a situation arises, our brains explain to us what is going on. Here is an example: One day, when you arrive at work, you say “hello” to a colleague who does not return your greeting. Your mind then begins to offer explanations about why that happened. “They must not have heard me.” Or “They do not like me.” Or “They are so stuck-up.” Left unchallenged, the story your brain just told you becomes **the** story. “Oh, well,” you say, “I’ll catch up with them later.” Or “Hmphed, guess I will not go out of my way to be nice to them!” Depending on which story you believe, it will change your response to the person and your relationship.

What if, instead, you were curious about what happened? Suppose you then kindly approached that colleague again and said, “Good morning, how are you today?” You might discover that they did not hear you the first time or were lost in thought before because they bear an emotional burden. The whole nature of your relationship might change if you believed a more positive story your brain tells you about what happened.

Accept for a moment that our minds indeed create narratives and stories about what is happening in our lives. Remember that some of those stories may or may not be based on actual truth regarding what is going on. By being curious, is it possible that life and our responses to it are perceptions that can be changed? How might we benefit from examining those stories more closely?

Let us go back to the story in our first lesson, Numbers. The people are impatient and cranky. They are speaking against Moses and God. They know this is wrong, yet they cannot seem to stop complaining. Then they are beset by the poisonous serpents. They believe that God sent the serpents to punish them. That is the story their brains told them. "We complained. We made God mad. God is punishing us." A simple equation of events. So they go to Moses and ask him to intercede on their behalf. God instructs Moses on what to do, and those who do it are saved. There you have it. Disobedience, followed by repentance, acceptance of forgiveness, obedience, and you are good to go.

A more curious examination of that story might go like this: "What if God never sent the serpents? What if the serpents were on their own journey and happened upon the Israelites? What if God recognized that the people behaved as they did because they were captivated by fear, and God decided to be patient with them until the Israelites realized that all would be well if they placed their faith in God?"

When the Israelites finally do ask God for help, how does God respond? Does God say, "Too bad for you!" No, God provides them with healing. Now, which version

of the story resonates with you? God sent the snakes to punish the people and teach them a lesson. The snakes were just there and when the people asked God to help them deal with the snakes, God provided healing? Then ask yourself another question, “Who do I believe God is and why?” Okay, that is technically two questions. My point is this, whomever we believe God to be influences our relationship with God.

When Jesus said, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” He told us a story about who God is that we could believe in without fear. I could be wrong. However, I do not think that a God who sends a beloved messenger to the people to remind them of God’s love for them is a God who would harm them.

While it is true that bad things happen in life. What if those experiences are not expressions of God’s anger? What if, instead, we tell ourselves this story, “Bad things are happening, I am suffering, God will help me through this”? The ability to see, hear, and feel God’s presence in every situation takes practice, especially if this idea is new to us. Make no mistake. I am not talking about staying in optimistic denial no matter what. Instead, I am suggesting that the practice of looking for evidence of God’s love and healing in every situation is spiritually empowering. It is a practice whereby we tell our brains, “Yes, I know you are afraid. And we will ask God to be present with us as we live this experience.” Faith and belief in the light of God, in God’s love in every circumstance, is an ongoing spiritual journey that is worth taking.

We prepare for and begin a journey that explores our relationship with God during Lent knowing that Easter Day is not the destination. Everlasting life does not end. However, it does start when we chose to embrace the love of God and invite the light of Christ into our hearts as a daily practice. And that, my friends, is a story we can believe.