

This Sunday's readings:

Numbers 21:4-9

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

Judgmental or Just: True and Loving
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The gospel for this fourth Sunday in Lent is John, Chapter 3:

And 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, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

The gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, during the Lenten Journey, we pray that you would allow us to see ourselves clearly. We pray that you would also allow us to see you clearly and to be changed by your love and grace that we might be blessed, others might be blessed through us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The readings in today's service, especially the second lesson and the gospel, are very familiar texts, or at least sections of them are. But I was taken aback this week, when I first saw the way the Ephesians text begins. I'm wondering if, maybe, you are taken aback by this too.

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.” That seems pretty harsh. I don't want either now or anytime in my life to have been thought of as a “son of disobedience.” But even though I may not like it, I have to acknowledge that it's still true. There are many times in my life when I continue to be selfish, when I continue to want to live by my own rules, rather than live by the things that God calls me to do. We are sinners and we are sinners in need of a savior. So that's understanding better who we are.

I'm hoping the focus of our text today cannot just be on who we are, but rather on who God is and how God responds to the sin and evil, the selfishness, as well as the brokenness of our lives and of our world. So let's listen to how this comes out in our lessons today.

First, there's this lesson in Numbers. In Numbers 21, we hear about God's people. They have been rescued from slavery in Egypt and they are out in the wilderness. As they change course and begin to head back toward the Red Sea, the text says “the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses.” Well, I know that I'm guilty of being impatient. Most people who know me would not give me high marks for my patience. I think of myself as a little more driven, maybe, than that. But what we see in this text in Numbers, what we see in this journey of the people of God in the wilderness is they forgot that God was rescuing and providing. First, in their complaint, they say they have no food and then they say they don't like the worthless food that they have because God is providing manna from heaven. And they're ungrateful. They don't understand what's happening. They don't like what's happening. They want to live by their own rules. So there's this very nasty text, “Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people in Israel died.”

They turn against God and they are punished. The people are told to turn to God for life. Now there is an interesting little piece of history here that we may not be very aware of, but the people of Israel were extremely aware of. There is an Egyptian god that is in the form of a serpent. It's called Apep or Apophis. It was an Egyptian deity that embodied chaos.

The reality is when we turn against the direction that God wants to give us as his people to live in, we begin to introduce chaos and we begin to stir other peoples up to be complainers and to work against those who are leading. It creates a chaos. So as the people realize that what they're doing is wrong and they come back to Moses in this need of theirs, this desperation with these serpents biting them, they admit "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you" and they ask Moses, who they have spoken against, to now turn to God and speak for them. I love the way that text turns and, of course, Moses does pray. The Lord speaks and He tells Moses to put a bronze serpent, a fiery serpent made of bronze, on a stick and to hold it up. He says anybody who looks at that will be healed from the venomous snake bites.

Now, this is a difficult story, but it's interesting that God seems to be showing that He's in charge, that He rules over this snake god and over the snakes. If the people will look to Him instead of chaos, if people look to Him instead of their own desires, that indeed God provides healing and life and purpose and meaning. He led them out of Egypt, so that they could be his people and live in a unique relationship with God that would allow God to bless them and to bless the whole world through them. But when they try to go off in their own way, they engage in this chaos and God says don't look to your own will, look to me and see that I have power over all of creation and all of the chaos.

Then as we turn to our gospel, just before that most familiar John 3:16, we hear Jesus himself reference this event in Numbers, when he says in verse 14, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." We turn to God. We look to God for life, for healing, for rescue, as well as for direction. Numbers 21 says "Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole." And then we learn from Jesus that the Son of Man will be lifted up on a cross. Anybody who looked to the serpent on the pole in the wilderness was healed and anyone who believes in Jesus in his death and resurrection is given eternal life. Life from the One lifted up. We're then reminded "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

What does God do when He sees our need, when he sees our sin, when he sees our chaos? He comes. He comes to rescue us. He comes to provide help and hope. We can look at

these stories and ask the question, why is God so judgmental? But I would ask, isn't God just revealing what is true, and isn't God coming to us, so that he can rescue us from the chaos in which we place ourselves. God knows our need and he comes to address our need. For as John 3:17 says, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved."

We need God. Confession and repentance are all a part of simply recognizing the truth of who we are. We need God and God sent his Son to meet our needs, to bring us the forgiveness we require. I don't like to admit when I'm wrong, but that doesn't make me right. God isn't making us sinners. He's recognizing that we are. God isn't judging us, so much as he's understanding the just reality of our lives. God sees the needs in our world and he sends his Son. As we see in the Ephesians text, he knows that we don't deserve, he knows that we don't earn his grace. But he gives us his grace as a gift, so that we might respond to that grace and do the good things that he designed from the beginning for us to do. That we might in his grace then begin to be gracious, that we might experience the love of God and then begin to share the love of God in ways that people can experience the healing and the love and the embrace of the community and of God himself.

When we are called to repentance, when we are called on for the things that we do that are wrong, when we are asked to acknowledge either our unintentional mistakes or our intentional sin, or even our sins of omission, let's remember who God is. God is a God who comes to us in our sin, to restore us, to make us new, to show us the way of life. Or, as I read on the internet this week, God's not mad at you. He's madly in love with you.

Let us pray. Father, when we become aware of our sin, help us to remember who you are, help us to turn and look to you for forgiveness, for restoration, and for new direction in our lives. You know our needs and you know the needs of our world. Guide us and direct us, we pray, in the way of love and grace and peace. Amen.