

## **Healing in the Wilderness?** Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-17

A month or so ago the new Mars Rover landed on an old lakebed on Mars. You've seen the pictures. Talk about wilderness. The scientists hope to find signs of life....microbial life probably or something not as exciting as little green people. But right now it just looks like a huge empty place.

Today our theme is wilderness but also healing. The desert fathers back in the day used to go out to the wilderness to flee the temptations of the flesh. And they discovered that temptation followed them because it dwelt in their hearts. Jesus went out to the wilderness also for a time of testing. It was there that he met the devil. And today we are in a wilderness. It's been over a year of covid isolation and many of us are finding the wilderness a real weary journey.

Some of us have gone beyond complaining as the Israelites did to Moses. Why have you brought us out here to die! Some of us are at the point of numb acceptance...all life and energy gone. Wilderness, an empty place where there is none but ourselves and God to face. What good can come out of this?

I used to go on silent retreats which were a kind of wilderness wandering. It was a time to just be with God. And sometimes it was great and sometimes it was boring and empty. I wanted to fill up my time reading the Bible or journaling...and not listening to the silence....listening for God. God doesn't always speak to us clearly or even when we are listening. We don't control God. Wilderness makes us very aware of that.

The children of Israel had been wandering for a time. They were getting used to being a people who were not slaves of others and had to learn to govern themselves. Moses gave them the law to follow to guide their getting along and truly become a people of God. But things didn't happen quickly. When you have so many people traveling together in a barren land you have issues. People get tired of the same food. They get tired of the same rules and leadership and when natural troubles happen they have very little patience and are quick to point blame to the leadership or any other scapegoat.

When they ran out of water they complained to Moses. When they ran out of food they complained to Moses. When they were attacked by snakes...a natural wilderness predator...they complained to Moses. They complained because they were tired and grumpy and this was one thing too many. I totally understand, don't you?

I cry out with the Israelites: Lord have you brought us out here to die? I long for my family. I long for relationships in person. I long for meaning in existence. For what do you long? Where is your pain, loss, confusion? Is it loneliness? Is it boredom? Is it frustration with those you are cooped up with? Is it physical illness or pain? All of us carry in ourselves the heartache of the wilderness, a long dry dusty road that seems to lead to nowhere.

Moses prays for the people. And God tells him to put the symbol of a snake on a pole, lift it up and those who look on it will be safe. I have always found the story of the snakes and the children of Israel in the wilderness puzzling. Here they were a group of people wandering in the wilderness and they run into a bunch of snakes that bite them and they die. That is not unusual. Snakes and wilderness go together. I

once dated a guy who was into the foxfire books about survival and he would tell me stories of how to survive in the desert by sucking on rocks to help with the thirst...and the eating of rattlesnakes which he assured me tasted like chicken. I never tried.

What is unusual about this story is that God tells the children of Israel to make a bronze snake and hold it up (like an idol) and whoever would look at it when bitten would survive and not die. It sounds a bit to me like the Christianization of certain holiday traditions that really have their roots in pagan religions. It sounds like the traditional animistic religions of the region...animistic meaning worship of nature or natural things and animals (like snakes) made into something that Yahweh, the God of the Jews and us, would approve of.

When Dan and I were on Sabbatical in 2009 we had the opportunity to visit Hierapolis in Greece which is an ancient site of medicine. People would travel to Hierapolis to be healed of whatever ailed them. They would bathe in the hot springs and have other treatments. One of the symbols there is of a snake on a pole. This comes from Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing, who carried a staff with one serpent wrapped around it, which has become the symbol of modern medicine. Is this where Moses came up with the replica of a serpent on a pole, the Nehushtan, mentioned in Numbers 21:8? This would have been considered modern medicine at the time. But intricately linked with pagan religion which was anathema to the Israelite faith.

So here is an interesting story of it seems idolatry being called on by God Godself. Lift up this bronze serpent and look at it and you will be healed. Hmmm. So what on earth can we gain from this story? Well, actually quite a lot. The children of Israel were afraid of snakes and their power. They had to face that fear to overcome it. Fear separates us from God and each other. Children instinctively hide when danger comes, fire, abusive adults, whatever. We also tend to hide when we are afraid. And that is okay, but, if we allow it to rule us, we end up cutting off relationships and the potential for healing. Healing can be a very scary thing as we face that which we fear.

And when we are in the wilderness there's nothing to distract us from that which we fear. I was in a conversation a while back and the issue came up of some family troubles. But the person I was speaking with didn't want to talk about those troubles. They wanted to only think about the positive things. Anything negative was too scary to look at, even if it might be helpful to others in a similar situation. It was frustrating for me because I needed to understand my family dynamics. Life is full of bad things, scary things, and we can for a time pretend they aren't there but eventually they will pop up to be dealt with. And since there is nowhere to hide in the wilderness that is where we often have to deal with them. Jesus dealt with the devil and the temptations he brought. The Israelites faced the snakes and dealt with them in order to be healed. To go into the wilderness is often to face things that surprise us, sometimes good, sometimes bad. It takes courage to face the unexpected.

When God commanded Moses to make a serpent to save the people from the serpents that were killing them, they had to face their fears. And by facing those fears they found salvation. How might God also use the very things in our lives that are killing us to bring us into new life and healing? God does not respond to the people's prayer by taking the serpents away. Rather, God brings healing when they

confront their sin, look upon the source of their wounds raised up and face their own darkness. Sometimes God answers our prayers and brings about new life, but not in the way we had imagined.

I'd like to spend just a little time talking about healing. I understand that abuses have happened in healing prayer. I know that people have been made to feel guilty for not being healed. They have been blamed for not having enough faith. I know that people's faith has been weakened when prayers for healing have been answered negatively. We struggle with doubt, with no results after prayer, and so we hesitate to pray for healing, especially in corporate worship. I'm sorry this has happened. But it doesn't mean that God doesn't heal, or that we shouldn't ask and pray for healing, just because it doesn't always happen.

Can we come to God in faith that God loves us unconditionally and that God wants what is best for us? Can we pray that God's will be done in this or that situation...and let God know what we would prefer happen? Of course we can. We can always ask for healing for ourselves, for others, for physical healing, emotional healing, and relational healing. No, God will not always heal in the way we wish but God can and does bring healing.

Years ago I was engaged to a young man with cancer. We held healing services for him. His parents were Charismatic and they prayed for and claimed his healing. And Tim died. And at the funeral a friend of mine said to me: well I guess God didn't heal him. I thought that was rather insensitive to say...but I said: yes, God did heal Tim. Tim is whole and in God's presence today. Healing sometimes comes with death, or something else. Sometimes persons are left with debilitating issues for the rest of their lives. We don't know why, but we can continue to pray. Prayer does work.

Studies have been done that show that people who are sick and have been prayed for get better more quickly than those who haven't been prayed for. So let's keep praying. It's not our prayers that heal. It is God who heals, but prayer plays a part that we don't understand. And it's okay not to understand everything.

Now Bill and Leona have been walking through a wilderness with Bill's Parkinson's. It has come to the point where Bill is unable to do basic things for himself. He sees no improvement in his physical life journey, only more suffering. Bill longs to see Jesus face to face. He longs for healing and wholeness on the other side of the Jordan. And after a great deal of conversation with family and friends he hopes to leave us here soon. I would invite us to pray for Bill and the extended family as they walk this journey together. Let us pray for peace and certainty and God's grace to cover this time of transition. Let us bless them with prayer. God can take care of any ethical issues they or we may face. Let us with compassion lift up Bill into God's care and love, so his spirit may at the right time be embraced by the arms of Jesus, that he be completely healed whether on this or the other side of life.

I invite you to stand if you are able and pray with Dan and myself as we anoint and pray for Bill. I invite you to do this by stretching your arms out toward them as we pray. I know that some of you may have issues with this, either the healing prayer or the issue of death, but I invite you to join us anyhow with this blessing of prayer and peace for Bill and Leona and all who walk this particular wilderness journey. Let us pray:

Can we find healing then in the wilderness? That wilderness of dry dusty nothingness forces us to face ourselves, our fears, our temptations. And when we look at them clearly and deal with them with God's grace we will be healed.

As we walk toward the cross this Lenten season, we are invited to look to the cross, look to our fears, look to our salvation and healing.