A.M.D.G.! 4th Sunday in Lent - B Texts: Numbers 21: 4-9

 March 11th, 2018 John 3: 11-17

**Numbers 21:4-9** From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.’ Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.’  So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

**John 3: 11-17**  ‘Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And 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. For God 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. 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.

**Lift Up Your Eyes!**

Fear of one sort or another is an ever-present reality in our lives. On a global scale - violence and tension in many places around the world and posturing on the political stage like we have seen recently from Russia, the United States and North Korea, have many people in a state of anxiety. In this part of the country, the escalation of gang violence leaves us feeling unsafe, afraid and vulnerable. And warnings about climate change, visible to us through things like the melting ice caps at both the North and South poles, and the acceleration of the extinction of many species of animals, have a lot of us wondering about the future of our world.

Some of us have a fear of death or dying; others a fear of getting sick or being alone. As parents, we secretly fear that something may happen to our children or our grandchildren. Sometimes it is the fear of feeling useless or unproductive that comes at such times as unemployment, retirement or a debilitating illness - while for still others it is the process of getting older that we fear.

More and more, however, it seems our hearts are gripped by fears that leave us feeling confused, uncertain, anxious and paralysed. We find ourselves playing the ‘what if’ game .... “What if such and such happens”, we ponder - living in the anxiety of the worst case scenario. Some of us become so consumed by worry that we get ulcers, have hearts attacks, or suffer migraines.

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And by fearing that the worst will happen - our own thoughts may sometimes help to bring about the very thing we fear. Someone once wrote, *“Fear is the wrong use of imagination. It is anticipating the worst - not the best that can happen.”*

The story is told about a salesman, driving on a lonely country road one dark and rainy night, who had a flat tire. He opened the trunk - no lug wrench. The light from a farmhouse could be seen dimly up the road. He set out on foot through the driving rain. Surely the farmer would have a lug wrench he could borrow, he thought. Of course - it was late at night - the farmer could be asleep in his warm, dry bed. Maybe he wouldn’t answer the door. And even if he did, he might be angry at being awakened in the middle of the night. The salesman - picking his way blindly in the dark, stumbled on. By now, his shoes and clothing were soaked. Even if the farmer did answer his knock, he thought - he’d probably shout something like, “*What’s the big idea waking me up at this hour!*” This thought made the salesman angry. What right did that farmer have to refuse him the loan of that lug wrench?! After all - here he was - stranded in the middle of nowhere - soaked to the skin. That farmer was a selfish clod - no doubt about it

He finally reached the house and banged loudly on the door. A light went on inside, and a window opened above. A voice called out, “Who is it?” His face white with anger, the salesman answered, “You know darn well who it is! It’s me! And you can keep your blasted lug wrench. I wouldn’t borrow it now if you had the last one on earth!”

Sometimes we spend so much time anticipating the worst - that we become our own worst enemy! Fear or anxiety can be debilitating - and for those of us who are people of faith - can serve to block out a sense of the presence of God with us - leaving us feeling abandoned and bereft - left to the whims of a cruel world.

Which is exactly where we find the ancient Israelites as we join them this morning. The book of Numbers relates for us this rather bizarre story. Once again - as the people are wandering in the desert under the leadership of Moses - they begin to moan and complain about their life. From the beginning - the story of the escaped Hebrews is full of reports of trouble and suffering, accompanied by constant complaining - or ‘murmuring’ as the King James translated it - against Moses and Aaron. The people did not like the bitter water of Marah in Exodus 15. They complained about the lack of food in Exodus 16. In Exodus 17, they murmur that they are thirsty - and Moses strikes the rock at the LORD’s command and water gushes forth. When the march resumed around Sinai, they were back at it again, asking for meat to eat - we are told in Numbers 11.

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Now today’s reading records the final complaint of the people. We are told, *“The people became impatient on the way. And they spoke against God and against Moses. ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?’ they cried. ‘For there is little water - and we detest this miserable food!’* It is at this point they ran into a nest of poisonous snakes or serpents - and many people died. God told Moses to make a serpent of bronze and put it on a pole - so that whenever someone was bitten - by looking at the bronze serpent in their midst, they would be reminded of God’s presence with them and they would be healed.

Notice that when the people ask God to take the snakes away - God doesn’t do that. Instead - God gives the people a new chance at wholeness. In order to be healed, the people have to look up from their own shadows, lift their eyes from their own complaints, and see - face to face - the very thing that has caused so much pain and grief. Only by confronting it head on, can they move from the darkness to the light. The bronze serpent didn’t cure anyone - but by looking up at it, the Israelites could see beyond themselves to a loving, merciful God. It was only by facing their fears and reaffirming their faith and trust in God .... by moving their attention downward from that which caused them anxiety and looking up to God’s possibility of healing - that they were healed and saved.

And often, it is only when we face our fears, our brokenness, our need – that can we move through and beyond them to healing. When we keep our eyes focussed downward on that which troubles us - our vision becomes narrowly focussed and our world tends to close in on us. But when we can lift our eyes up - we can often see God offering to us a fresh perspective, other options and a new direction.

This story and life-lesson became so deeply ingrained in the hearts of the Jewish people - that centuries later, as the Christian church spoke of Jesus and the crucifixion - they saw a parallel. By looking to the One lifted up on a Cross, they felt - we are given the courage to face our fears, and to know God’s healing love and grace. In the beautiful and beloved passage of scripture we hear today from the 3rd chapter of the gospel of John: *“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. For God so loved the world that He gave His only son, that whosoever believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world - but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*

As Christians, we are assured that whatever fears keep our lives paralysed and our hearts bound - by looking to Jesus in trust - we are given the strength and the courage to let go of any crippling anxiety that prevents us from living in the abundance of God’s amazing grace.

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It is significant that the English word ‘*worry*’ is derived from an old Anglo-Saxon word ‘*worien*’ - which means ‘to strangle’ or ‘to choke’. With God’s help, by facing our fears and lifting up our eyes in trust - we can break the choke-hold that anxiety puts on our life. And as we do, we may find some amazing things happen:

 As we lift our eyes - we may see others in similar situations, and find mutual comfort in knowing that we are not alone in our struggles.

 Or we may gain some perspective - as we see the pain or challenges of another - that our’s is really not as bad as we thought.

 But most of all - facing our fears and lifting up our eyes in trust - opens us up to God’s grace, God’s presence, God’s possibility for our lives, and God’s healing love.

Our scripture today reminds us that even in our worst failures and disappointments,

God provides. God offers healing for our wounds, relationship for our loneliness, and faithfulness for our lack of trust. God doesn’t always remove the sources of our suffering - but God journeys with us - providing what we most deeply need - if we keep our eyes focussed in the right direction.

Lift up your eyes, we are urged this morning by the voice of God, speaking to us through the living Word. In joy and in sorrow, in life and in death - may God give us courage and hope. Amen