Fourth Sunday In Lent

Rev. Dr. Jennifer L. Lazzuri

Numbers 21:4-9

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3: 14-21

***Can we go back to Egypt?***

Looking back and remembering seems to be one of our favorite past times. We all hear and tell stories that involve “remembering when”. And it is always interesting how these stories are told and how the event is remembered. My kids like to tell the story of the “death march” that I had them on one year. We had taken a cruise together and had disembarked the boat at a port and had taken a taxi to a local point of interest. I have four children, plus myself, plus one had a friend, so it was 5 children and myself. The cost of this taxi bus was not cheap to get us there. It maybe averaged around 50.00-60.00 to get the six of us there. (Which to some may seem inexpensive, but to a single mother, every dollar counts) On the way back, as I had now seen the route for myself and could see how to return to the boat, I decided I was going to save my $50.00 and we were going to walk. Back to the boat. After a long day spent outside in the hot sun. Abbey, my beloved third daughter, I think is the one who began to complain first. Her complaints progressively got louder and more frequent and rumblings of “this death march mom has us doing”. It was hot. It was miserable. In retrospect maybe I should have sprung for a cab - but we made it. And it turns out that it wasn’t as bad looking back as it was in the moment. In the moment, I think for all of us, we were pretty miserable. We didn’t have the capacity to see much beyond our current hot and thirsty moment. They wanted me to do something and do something now for them.

Numbers begins today with the people complaining and wanting to go back to Egypt. There seems to be much of the Israelites complaining at various points in the Old Testament. I speak with no judgement. They were human as we all are. It seems they always were wanting to go back to the way things had been as God was moving them forward.

My children in telling the story of the “death walk” as Abbey has named it, tell it laughing and jokingly now. They look back on it and maybe it wasn’t a fond memory - but it was a memory that we all shared together that they won’t forget. Looking back on it was better than living it at the moment.

I think that is how it is with memories.

It has been said that every church has a “back to Egypt committee”. Churches look back, as other institutions and society does in general, with nostalgia thinking about “the good olde days”. Whether those days were really all that good, no one ever challenges most of the time. And I suspect that much of our longing looking back comes from a fear of the unknown and unexpected of the future. We are afraid to go where God is leading us often. We romanticize the past - making it better than it was.

We are in our second pandemic Lent. That seems unreal to me. Who would have thought we would have gone through one and now we are in another. We still longingly look back and that is okay. We miss what was. But, as we come back, we won’t be going back to exactly what was, and this is going to be hard. As we move forward we must continually remind ourselves that God is moving us forward - Egypt is no more. We are moving forward. And we are impatient. And somewhat trepidatious.

From Mount Hor the Israelites set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. (Numbers 21:4) They became impatient. And complained. And the Lord it says sent poisonous serpents among the people. And Moses their leader prayed for them 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.”

Some see this as a sign of idolatry. I don’t know. If you believe the story, I know that it was God providing a way for the Israelites to not die from the snake bites. If they looked at it, they would live.

The Gospel text this morning begins with “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.”

The analogy is, that those who look on the Son of Man and believe may live.

Enter John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”

Which implies necessarily that those who do not believe in Him shall perish. We encounter a characteristic of the Gospel of John in this reading of the sharp divisions between believers and non-believers, saved and condemned, people who love darkness rather than light, do evil and not good (verses 19-21).

Context is king - so we must take this passage in its context - First and foremost, John 3:16 is a first word to Nicodemus, a man, a Pharisee, a leader used to privilege and entitlement needs to hear that God loves the world. (You must read the verses before this for the story of Nicodemus) And so do the disciples.

In considering the historical context of the Johannine community at the end of the first century, there was a polarity between insiders and outsiders, a sharp contrast between the community and the dominant culture, those have the truth and those who do not.

Nicodemus recognizes Jesus as a teacher from God, that Jesus is sent from God, but he does not have full understanding. Jesus chides him for his lack of understanding. In the Gospel of John, some of Jesus’ sharpest criticisms are directed to those who believe or have insight about Jesus but keep it secret, or who do not live fully into that which they know.

In the gospel of John, in this community, the division is not so much between Jews and Christians but amongst believers. Those who chose to stay and worship in the synagogue and those who had separated themselves from the synagogue. John 12: 42-43, even some of the authorities believed in Jesus but did not confess it for fear of being put out of the synagogue.

It is hard to distinguish oneself from the crowd.

The gospel narrative speaks of the experience of a minority group defining itself not only within Judaism but also defining itself among followers of Jesus.

This passage is not written to exclude others, but rather to support those who are making difficult choices to belong. Likely the intent was to encourage others to join them. To embrace the light.

I was humbled and delighted in our Bible study this past week as we discussed this passage. This group of mainly women who join faithfully each week wrestle with, explore, meditate on the upcoming lectionary passages for this week. One of our participants shared how she was so hopeful in reading these passages. I sat back and smiled, because I was not hopeful, I was distraught! But what a gracious reminder of the glory and the hope and during this Lenten season to be reminded of the hope to come.

We are being invited to participate in the light.

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up.

As we consider the phrase, “to be lifted up” let us not limit our thinking specifically and only to the cross, but the entirety of the event the cross sets in motion.

This passage is leading us in Lent. It is leading us to Easter and resurrection. “I will bring all people to myself.” The cross sets in motion an ongoing abiding relationship with God. The cross leads to resurrection and ascension. We now have a way to have an ongoing relationship with God.

It is not just that we have a place with God later if we believe, but we have a place with God right now. It opens a place for us right now. Today.

“ And this is the judgement, that light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than light…”

We all are ready to go back to normal. And we are moving toward having things again and worshipping in ways that are familiar to us. But we need to be aware as we move forward, that we do not make a commitment to idolatry (the raising up of a serpent instead of trusting in God who was leading them), (and I want to be clear I am not saying that I think the serpent was an idol - but it was something the people could look at and hold on to at that time), but that as we go back to normal, our commitment is to what God is doing in the world, not in looking back to Egypt - longing for what was.

How are we living into our new realities?

Jesus brought to the Johannine community in his day some new realities.

He became very direct. He was offering a chance of reconciliation to God, an act of divine love.

How are we encountering the divine love that is being offered through Jesus, through the cross? Through the resurrection and ascension?

One of our parishioners in Bible study shared that she was full of hope and feeling the love of God.

I wanted to jump. And sing.

Ad yet I was stuck on the verse,

“ And this is the ***judgement***, that light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than light…”

and forgot to move forward to the rest of the story.

The Greek word here judgement is crisis/ ***krisis***. This is a crisis moment. A discerning moment. A turning point. How are you going to live?

Are you going to live in this light? Are you going to live in this love?

This is what is at stake.

Are you going to choose to be in relationship? For a relationship to be mutual you have to respond. Are you responding to this love? How are you responding or not?

This crisis moment didn’t just start. There was something wrong with the world, people loved the darkness and not the light. In the beginning we were in relationship with God and the entire story is God recovering the original intent. We chose to step out of relationship. God rewrites us into the story with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Are we living into these new realities?

Or are we looking back to Egypt? The goal is not a better life now - the response is not one of impatience, “I don’t see where we are heading God so I want to go back”… the goal is this encounter with divine love.

I saw it in the faces of those in Bible study this week.

I was reminded of my own constant need of this encounter.

During this season of Lent, may we choose light over darkness. May we not look back to Egypt. May we be drawn into the story of divine love.

Amen.