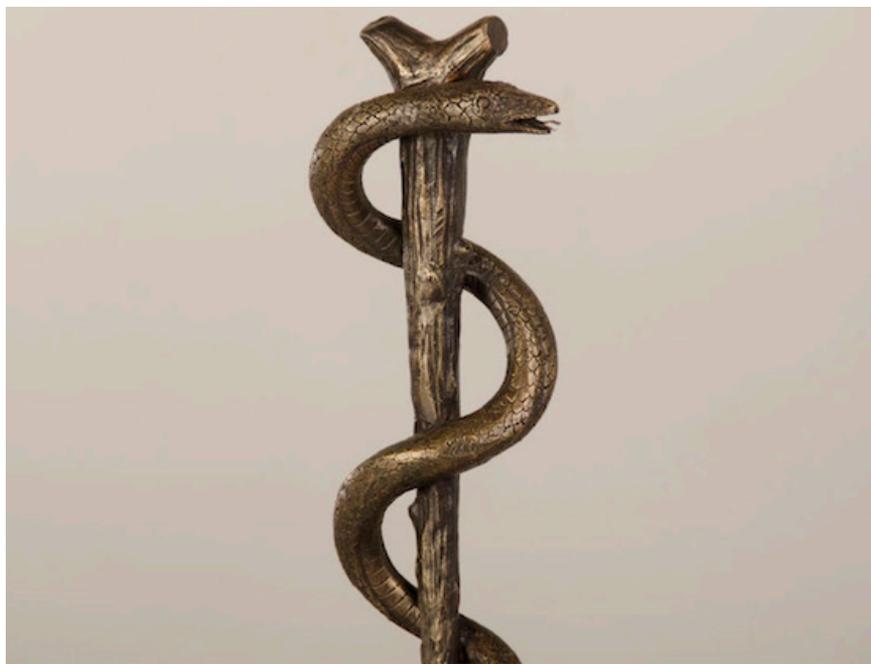


ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

23 E. Airy Street | Norristown PA 19401 | (610) 272-4092



HOW NOT TO COMPLAIN

The Rev. Andrew F. Kline

Text of a Sermon preached on the Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 14, 2021

NUMBERS 21:4-9 | PSALM 107:1-3, 17-22

EPHESIANS 2:1-10 | JOHN 3:14-21

The Book of Numbers is the fourth book of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. These five books tell the founding story of the people of God, the Israelites. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Each books plays a role in that story.

Numbers tells the tale of how the Israelites finally left Mount Sinai, first marching, and then wandering, through the desert for forty years.

Mt Sinai is where they received God's law and his regulations for ordering their lives, both between themselves and God. The desert is where they learned some of the first and most important lessons about why the principles and boundaries of the law were necessary for their survival and success.

Few would argue that this pandemic year has been a universal experience of wandering in the wilderness. Whether we contemplate the stress of novel threats to world health or the disruption of our daily routines, we find ourselves, like the people of Israel did, isolated, bored, and complaining in the wilderness. Imagine going through forty years like this! At the same time, imagine being Moses, being both judged for making his own mistakes, and needing to keep the people going.

Our first lessons opens with a vivid tale that captures both what the people and Moses are learning. Numbers 21, verse four says, "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." For those who know the geography, this is poignant.

Every time they had complained before, God had provided. Manna from heaven. Water from the rock. If they didn't have to take a detour around Edom, maybe they wouldn't have complained once again about the food and drink God had provided. This moment in the story reveals more than mere complaint, bad habits, it reveals a deep, almost impossible problem – let us call it a virus - an ancient family feud, that fuels the whole story.

What is the problem? If they could only go through Edom, they could go straight to the border of Israel in a matter of days. Unfortunately, the Israelites have an ancient feud with the Edomites. Jacob stole the blessing from his brother Esau. God gave Esau the land of Edom as a consolation prize. Israel and Edom did not trust each other. So Israel must go south in the desert, in the wrong direction, to go around Edom.

So, OK. We have one year under our belt. Lessons learned. Signs of hope on the horizon. Vaccines, an ancient cure, made by virtue of modern technology, a rapid miracle cure for millions. But still, we must laugh. Or cry. Because we still complain. Even as we complain, we also know that our problem is not our grumbling. Our problem is that we will not look at all the things that are killing us.

How best to explain this? I talked to a friend the other day who I hadn't spoken to for several years. It was wonderful. We were catching up on family and the challenges in the community. We had a funny way of not mentioning the pandemic by name. We were beginning to talk about other things, getting people back to work, taking care of the planet, the atmosphere of disinformation and distrust all around, when all of a sudden he did suddenly mention that he had the virus in January, was three weeks in the hospital, and wasn't sure he was going to make it!

I was in awe. My friend had almost died, and I could not get a word of complaint out of him! One of the striking things in the story of the bronze serpent is that instead of sending bread from heaven and water from the depths of the earth, God decides they need is poisonous snakes! God sent a reminder of how they were biting and devouring each other.

What Moses does next, lifting up the bronze snake as an instrument of healing, encapsulates the ancient wisdom of the vaccine. We need to understand, even use, what is killing us, in order to get back our life.

So that must be how my friend arrived at his secret cure. His resolve to give thanks in all things, to journey with faith and joy, without complaint, through this wilderness. Stop avoiding your problems. Understand what is biting you, what is killing you.

The gift that God is giving us today is a deep gift of contemplation. The invention of the vaccine, the discovery of how we stimulate our immune system just enough with a near copy of the virus meant to kill us, in order to protect us, will always be a miracle. We learned to do it thousands of years ago with the venom of snakes, hundreds of years ago with the pox of cattle, and these days by changing the RNA code in a test tube. God told Moses to put the snake on the pole so the people could see it, contemplate it, understand it.

There is one disease, sickness unto death, that is the final frontier. Our separation from God and one another requires the most radical understanding of all. That is why we should never forget the context of what has become justifiably the most often quoted passage of the Bible. Jesus said: "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.”

Yet those very words of grace were a commentary on this story from Numbers: “Jesus said, “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.”

For those of us who believe, grace turns the shape of our lives into the upward trajectory of the cross, the resurrection, and ascension, because by all three, Son of Man is lifted up, and we join him, united with him, by grace through faith, to enter into that divine life.

Yet, the mystery remains. Our lessons this morning all tell us that we cannot enter on that upward path unless we face the reality of the darkness we are living, and decide not to love it, to dwell in it. The way through suffering and darkness is light and understanding.

We cannot be saved if we will not face our problems, all of them. We cannot run from our brother Esau, the land of Edom we would like to go around, the snakes biting us in the wilderness. We must face the evil that is crouching at the door, the sin that clings so close, the divisions between us that continue to cause so much distrust and brokenness.

By doing so, we receive that miraculous medicine of the cross, and the promise of the Holy Spirit, the first fruit of living a life marked by resurrection hope.

My friends, do not love the darkness more than the light. Rather, look up, and be made alive in Christ.