

---

Idol Hands  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
March 10, 2024  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-21

Today, we are invited to keep on our journey towards Easter. That journey we call Lent. And today the authors of the lectionary chose to connect the journey of Lent to the story of the journey of the exodus. Which is why we read about the Hebrew people wandering in the wilderness today. A very short summary of the exodus narrative is that the Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt, and God liberated the people. The people - who renamed themselves, "Israelites" left Egypt and journeyed to the land called Canaan - modern day Palestine Israel, because of the idea that God wanted them to live there.

In today's passage, the people are still on the "journey" part of the adventure. And they are not having a good time. They do not like the food or the lack of water. In the Bible it says that the journey lasted 40 years. Depending on where we think the end points of the journey might have been, the people would have covered about 500 km. That would be an average speed of 34 metres per day. If you walked 8 hours per day, that works out to stopping because someone says, "wait, I need to go to the bathroom" 239 times every day. I've done the math! It is not hard to imagine people reacting negatively to a journey like that.

For me - that part of the story is not strange at all. It is not strange that living as a tourist - living out of a proverbial suitcase - wears thin after awhile. It is not strange that we feel upset when we cannot get the food and drink that we are used to. When we can't find our "comfort food". And the people's response to their deprivation isn't all that strange either - they complain. Do you know anyone who is a bit cranky if they don't get their morning coffee? I promise that none of you will ever see me before I have had 2 double espressos.

But the story continues. The complaining is only the first part. In the second part, God sends poisonous serpents to kill the people because they are complaining too much. And the people repent, and so does God. It's a bizarre story. Most of us know how to

---

handle whiners and complainers, but in this story, the only solution “God” can imagine is murder.

That part of the story is almost sensible. But now the mythical story gets a bit strange. Because when the people repent, God does not get rid of the serpents. God does not prevent the serpents from biting the people. God does not even prevent the poison from making the people sick. Instead, God asks Moses to create a bronze serpent to put on a stick, so that sick people can look up at the bronze serpent and be cured.

But really - what kind of solution is that? If God made the serpents appear, why would God not simply get rid of them? And if the people are sick of Moses, why don't they just pick their own direction and head out? They didn't need to follow Moses. And more fundamentally, why can't God deal with complainers in a more constructive way? You and I have to find constructive ways to deal with complainers every single day. Are we able to do something that God cannot do?

Of course, if we take this story as literal history, all sort of questions like that will probably keep us up nights. Perhaps we need to read the story in some other way to allow underlying truths to surface. And this is not only my opinion. Many Jewish scholars believe that the exodus story is not a description of actual historical events. And that it's best teachings will come from reading the story in other ways. Professor Ze'ev Herzog, of the Archaeology Faculty at the University of Tel Aviv in Israel puts it this way “Following 70 years of intensive excavations in the Land of Israel, archaeologists have found out: The patriarchs' acts are legendary stories, we [the Jewish people] did not sojourn in Egypt or make an exodus, and we did not conquer the land. Neither is there any mention of the empire of David and Solomon [outside the Hebrew Bible]. Those who take an interest have known these facts for years, but Israel is a stubborn people and doesn't want to hear about it.”

Besides. As with most really old stories, if the stories are historically true, the stories do not really involve us because we were not there. However if the stories are mythical, then we are invited to find the truth of the story for ourselves today. And in that truth, we are involved and we have the potential to be effected. If we find truth in the story for today, then we have the potential to be transformed.

---

In order to put ourselves into the story, I think we need to hear how the story ends first. The story of the bronze serpent is not quite over. We heard how and why the bronze serpent was created. The Bible also speaks of the destruction of the bronze serpent. In 2 Kings the Bible speaks of a later time, and Hezekiah, is doing some house-cleaning. In Chapter 18 it says, “King Hezekiah removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan.”

So that is the complete life cycle for the bronze serpent. The bronze serpent was created so that the people could look up to it, find healing, and live. But over time people started to worship the bronze serpent itself. The bronze serpent became an object to which offerings were made. Over time, the bronze serpent became an idol. And so, Hezekiah had it destroyed. The bronze serpent was once a tool of salvation, but it came to be seen as an object of idolatry, and then it was destroyed. An object designed to promote healing became an idol. An object designed to promote healing became - over time - a barrier to healing. Great story. But does that sort of thing actually happen in real life? Well, yes!

Here is one example from a very unexpected source. The world of high finance. In 2012, when Greg Smith resigned from Goldman Sachs, the world was shocked by the passion that Smith - a finance geek - held. I quote from a letter he wrote, “It might sound surprising to a skeptical public, but culture was always a vital part of Goldman Sachs’s success. It revolved around teamwork, integrity, a spirit of humility, and always doing right by our clients. The culture was the secret sauce that made this place great and allowed us to earn our clients’ trust for 143 years. It was not just about making money; this alone will not sustain a firm for so long. It had something to do with pride and belief in the organization. I am sad to say that I look around today and see virtually no trace of the culture that made me love working for this firm for many years. I no longer have the pride, or the belief.” Smith says of the current situation, “To put the problem in the simplest terms, the interests of the client continue to be sidelined in the way the firm operates and thinks about making money.”

So, Goldman Sachs started as a financial institution that sought long-term success

---

through helping its clients. And in the process, they made a lot of money. But by 2012 - at least according to Greg Smith - making money has become the principle objective. Making money became an idol. Making money - something that used to be a vehicle to help other people, came to be seen as an idol. I think it's actually very easy to create something of value that over time becomes an idol.

The gospel story is about another idol. The reading included John 3:16. That's the verse number that is often written on pieces of cardboard and displayed to television cameras at sporting events. As if the entire Christian experience could be wrapped up with that single verse. The famous verse - The "God so loved that world" verse. I personally like the fact that the verse speaks of love. That it speaks of the love of God. That the verses following it speak of our response to that love.

But the full reading also speak of judgment of others. The verse speaks of lack of respect and tolerance for people of other faiths. These verses have been used to justify evil deeds done by Christians to non-Christians for centuries.

Now to be clear. We are not called to give up on the central role of Jesus in our own lives. We can keep Jesus. But as we journey through Lent, and as we approach Easter, it is a good chance to consider how to embrace Jesus as a key element of our faith. But in ways that allow people of other faiths to keep their own faith too. For us, Jesus is a living life force. Jesus is a source of healing and hope. But Jesus should not be an idol.

So with that out of the way, what - really - is the theme for today?

The authors of the lectionary invite us to compare the journey of Lent with the 40 year journey through the wilderness. Well, that's a popular idea of course. And you have likely heard countless sermons based on that idea. But this year, I think we have a more direct parallel. Yes, we are on the journey called Lent. But we are on another journey called "still recovering from the pandemic".

In the opening phases of the pandemic, there were a lot of parallels with the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness. My own observation from the early phases of the pandemic is that - like the wandering Hebrews in our story - many of us did a lot of complaining. We were not getting the food we wanted. We were not gathering like we wanted. We were not engaging our community like we wanted. There were many reasons

---

to complain, that is for sure.

And during the early phases of the pandemic, we had our own version of the bronze serpent. Something that we held up - high - to encourage people. I'm not sure what you had here. I was in Brantford when the pandemic started. And the serpent there was metaphorically a sign that people would look at that simply read "we will go back to normal". Anytime that someone in the church complained about some restriction like masking, someone - perhaps even me - would simply declare that this will end and we will get back to normal ... someday.

In the early days of the pandemic that idea made a lot of sense. But our pandemic journey lasted longer than anyone expected. No, it did not last 40 years. But remember that the Bible often uses the number "40" to simply indicate "a big number". And the pandemic lasted longer than most of us imagined.

In Brantford, those words "we will go back to normal" over time become an idol. Words designed to provide healing and hope early in the pandemic over time became words that were a barrier to healing. Because those words started to hold us back, preventing us from seeing new opportunities.

So here we are in 2024. At Chapel in the Park United Church. The pandemic is over. It has been over for awhile. But the effects of the pandemic still linger. Moreover, pandemic aside, we have gone through other changes here. 2 years ago we changed our identity through an amalgamation. 3.5 months ago we began our new ministry together. We've had lots of changes here - well beyond the changes brought on by the pandemic.

As we continue to emerge from the pandemic, we have a simple choice to make. Are we going to idolize our past and try to get back to that past? Right now is a great opportunity to consider what we have done in the past - things that once brought us life and hope. And if those things still bring us life and hope, then great, let's do them again. But if there is anything about our congregational life that we idolize to the point that it no longer brings us life, we are invited to let that go.

And on a personal level. Is there anything in our lives that we have turned into an idol? What bronze serpents do you have. Perhaps visible? Perhaps hidden away. If you are not sure where to look, consider anything in your life that is a barrier to you moving

---

forward. Perhaps unrealistic expectations? Perhaps withholding forgiveness from yourself or someone else? Perhaps your need to control other people? Perhaps waiting for life to give you something? Perhaps anger? Perhaps resentment? What is holding you back? What is preventing you from living the life that you need? Lent is a time to give things up. But don't give up chocolate. Give up the things that are holding you back.

God so loved the world. All of it. Let us embrace that. We can build on that. We can be part of that. As we continue our lenten journey, let us continue to journey together in love.

*Amen.*