

Lent IV

Numbers 21:4-9

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

St. Mary the Virgin

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In the name of the Eternal Mystery, the Infinite Word, and the Guiding Spirit, Amen.

When we take a Lenten journey, it's likely to take us exactly where we least want to go. That's where I found myself this week. The readings this morning may feel unsettling and uncomfortable, but they cannot be glossed over or simply set aside. For me, having to engage them led directly to pondering over what is the nature of God?to

There are many images and descriptions of God throughout the Bible. Sometimes they conflict. When we notice this, do we pick the image that appeals to us, or makes us most comfortable? If we believe in the goodness and all-loving nature of God, how do we reconcile the God we hear about, who would set poisonous snakes among his chosen, the Israelites, because of their complaints about the decades-long journey in the wilderness, and eating the same food, manna, day in and day out? How long could we go without a complaint or losing hope?

The reading from Numbers brings to mind the many refugees around the world today who have been forced to flee because of their faith or, like the Israelites, have fled to avoid death, or political or economic enslavement, only to spend years in camps or under fear of deportation and death upon return. How do they maintain their faith, and hope of a future for their children? The continuing faith of anyone under such conditions is remarkable.

Is God the stern, all-powerful ruler who punishes wavering faith and the loss of hope with death? In this morning's story about the Israelites, a number of conclusions about the nature of God are possible. If we take God's sternness literally or out of context, it can lead to a dangerous understanding, or theology, of God: If we misbehave, God will strike us. This "God will get you" theology has led people to conform out of fear of God's wrath, rather than to seek God's will because they want to have a relationship with God. Others have turned their back on this type of religion, either switching to another faith emphasizing love instead of fear or leaving religion altogether. Two of my great-grandfathers were ministers in the Christian Church. One soon left the ministry because of this type of theology. The other, after the death of his wife, hardened into a frontier evangelist focusing on sin and repentance and forgetting about love and forgiveness. All but one of his children left the church.

However, it's important to remember that we understand God through the lens of a particular time and place. Our understanding of God at any point is always partial and incomplete, and must be open to change. In this morning's story, while the details were culturally related to issues in a particular era, such

as idol worship in the surrounding culture that tempted the Israelites who had lost faith, the significance of continuing to have faith and trust in God's goodness and guidance, no matter what, was the key. How easily losing one's faith could lead to a loss of meaning, death, and annihilation.

Jewish theologians after the Holocaust had to grapple with a changing understanding of God. How could God let such an atrocity happen, to even the most faithful Jews? What had the people done to deserve extermination? Some years later, Conservative Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*,¹ explained in simple language how God could have a good and loving nature, and be creator and governor of the universe, and yet allow suffering and evil to exist. He argues that God is with us in our suffering, but by giving free will to humans, and to natural processes at creation, God cannot prevent suffering. As Christians, we see this in the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Faith and trust in God, no matter what, helps us hold on to meaningfulness and the hope that can get us through what we must endure. When those who had been admitted to the Nazi camps but not taken to the gas chambers lost meaning in their lives--meaning that could sustain hope, they become the equivalent of the walking dead, as Viktor Frankl referred to them. Without meaning, physical death often came quickly.² God gives us meaning and hope.

If we understand and affirm the goodness and love of God, then how do we interpret John's Gospel? This passage, too, if taken out of context, can lead to theological potholes. The first is the temptation to develop a personal relationship with Jesus who will mediate the sternness of God. This "bad cop, good cop theology" risks separating Jesus Christ from God, using Jesus to replace God as the object of our relationship and affection. It reminds me of a story a rector once told me about a woman who was alone in the church praying. A technician was testing the sound system and called out, "This is God." The woman didn't respond. A second time, he called out, "This is God!" She looked up heavenward and said, "Be quiet. I'm talking to your Son." It makes an important point of what can happen when we pick and choose among the divine Persons of the Trinity: We lose our sense of relationship with God. A Johannine scholar has argued that we cannot believe in Jesus Christ and also a vengeful God. As he put it, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto [God's] self...not standing sullenly aside, and needing [] to be reconciled."³

Another misunderstanding of God is theological elitism, often found in arguments over who's a Christian or not. For some, only those who confess their belief in Jesus, in a certain way, and with a specific set of conditions on that belief, are determined to be Christian, and therefore saved. Perhaps we've heard people called "unchristian" because of differences of belief. Denying one's identity itself leads to a form of Christian arrogance that separates us from one another and ultimately from God.

Some years ago, before the Peace Accord, I was traveling through Northern Ireland with a Catholic priest who I had known in seminary. The train stopped at a small town, a young man got on and sat down in

¹ Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. New York: Schocken Books, 1981.

² Cf. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1985.

³ Arthur John Gossip, "Exposition," to The Gospel According to St. John. In in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick. Vol 8, pp. 435-811. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1953, p.509.

our compartment. After a brief greeting, the priest (who was not wearing a collar) returned to reading his breviary and I to Kirk Vonnegut. After a few minutes, the young man said, "I just got out of prison." The priest asked, "What were you in for?" He replied that he had been part of a Protestant militant group. He then looked at the book the priest was reading, and said somewhat suspiciously, "Are you a Christian?" The priest replied, "Yes. I'm a Catholic Christian." He responded, "I didn't know Catholics could be Christian." We talked awhile, and then the young man reached into his paper bag, his only luggage, and brought out a half-full whiskey bottle, opened it, took a drink, and offered it to each of us. The symbolism was not lost on us. When the bottle returned to him, he put the cap back on, warmly said goodbye, and got off at the next stop. The power of relationship can transcend and heal our differences.

The Jewish Christian community of the Gospel of John had been thrown out of the synagogue. A rabbinical prayer exists from that era calling for Jewish Christians be destroyed and "blotted out of the Book of life..."⁴ For me, this affects how I understand the way in which the passage written. Believers in Jesus, as God's only Son, indeed were to be written in the Book of life, eternal life.

A Johannine scholar tells a story about eternal life:

Buddha was asked by his puzzled disciples, "But what is Nirvana? For sometimes you speak of it as if it were a present thing, and sometimes as if it lay in the future." He replied, "It is both. It is the ideal: is present, because it begins here; and future, because after death it expands into a far greater being than what we can know now, into the best that is conceivable."

This scholar adds that eternal life in a Christian context also is in the present. It is also in the future, because it will become "a fullness of glory that we cannot" begin to imagine.⁵

Not long ago, while I was preaching at another church, a little girl came through the greeting line after the service. She looked up at me and said, "My uncle is dying. He's a Buddhist. Is he going to hell?" From all I know about the love and inclusivity of God, I could not tell her that her uncle is condemned to hell because of his faith. A loving, compassionate God has a far deeper and greater understanding of the faith, the hearts, and the good deeds of all humanity than we can ever imagine. The reconciliation to God's purpose through the relationships we build with God and with one another, across faiths and other differences, is the journey in God's time that we are to travel. Amen.

⁴ Norman Perrin and Dennis C. Duling, *The New Testament: An Introduction*. Second Edition. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982, pp.339-40. See also R. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*. Vol. 1. Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1966, p. LXXXXV, cited in Perrin and Duling.

⁵ Gossip, p.511.