



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
“At Home” Worship
March 14, 2021

Gathering Around God’s Word

If you are worshipping with another family member or with children, you are invited to have different voices share and read the various parts of the service. You can also call/FaceTime someone to worship together. (If you have a prayer request you would like added to the At-Home Worship service, please email Brooke.office@wpceugene.org)

CALL TO WORSHIP

The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in love.
The law of the Lord revives the soul;
the word of God makes the simple wise.

OPENING HYMN

O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing

#610

CALL TO CONFESSION

This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, for people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. Let us uncover our sin before the liberating light of Christ.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Merciful God, we confess our sin and the hypocrisy of our complaints. We grumble about the evils in our world, even as we commit injustice and profit from deceit. We worry about scarcity while hoarding the goods of the world. Merciful God, expose our sins before the light of your grace. Heal our sin and free us from our foolish ways that we may know the joy of eternal life in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Almighty God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, open your Word and illumine our darkened world, that we may see clearly and live faithfully by the light of your truth in Jesus Christ. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Old Testament Reading: Number 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.

New Testament Reading: John 3:14-21

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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

ANTHEM

SERMON

"Patience for the Journey"

Rev. David Ukropina

Our gospel passage this week is from John, the third chapter. I've preached on this passage several times, including recently here at Westminster, and I'm sure you've heard it preached on frequently during your lives. All of this led me to consider the parts of the reading that are less focused upon, as well as the other lectionary readings.

And this immediately led me to the start of the text, where Jesus compares Moses and the serpent staff with his own crucifixion. He says, "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." This also connects with our Old Testament passage from Numbers that tells the story of Moses and the bronze serpent set on a staff.

When many Christians hear this story from Numbers, they immediately connect it with the story that Jesus himself tells, but the account in Numbers has its own significance apart from the gospel narrative. One thing that stands on its own is the context for our Numbers passage, which comes in a long line of the so called "grumbling" or "murmuring" stories.

We are familiar with the way that the people of God grumbled or complained throughout their wilderness journey. There are references just in Numbers, chapters 11, 14, 16, 20 and finally here in Numbers 21 about the people grumbling, murmuring and complaining. We know from the Bible that ever since leaving

Egypt, the people had a lot of complaints.

At times they complained about the bitter water, so God showed Moses how to sweeten it. They complained about not having food, so God gave them manna. They complained about being thirsty, so Moses struck the rock and water flowed from it. They complained about not having meat, so the Lord sent quails for food. At every turn, God provided for the people, but it didn't seem to help them trust any more in the providence of God.

The plague of snakes follows a similar pattern. The people are again complaining about not having food and water, and they complain about the manna God has given them, so God sent snakes among the people, so that many Israelites died. After the people repent of their sins to God and Moses, Moses prays to God, and God instructs Moses to make the bronze serpent staff.

We learn that whenever someone was bitten by a snake, they would look at the serpent and live. Its an interesting dynamic, as the symbol of a serpent is loaded with meaning, in the Bible, in history, and in life. Obviously, the serpent in the garden represented temptation, and the serpents in Egypt were often worshipped, and so represented idolatry.

In ancient Greece, snakes were often seen as being sacred and having healing powers. Medically, we are aware that snake venom can be used as an antidote for poisonous snake bites, and some of these healing properties recognized by the Greeks survive today in the symbol of the Caduceus, which we associate with Asclepius as a symbol of health used in the medical field.

I also think the symbol of a serpent on a staff serves a psychological role. The people were naturally afraid of snakes after so many deaths, but people are also instinctually afraid of snakes, and sometimes to overcome your fears, you have to face them. Someone once said, the cure for a snake is a snake, just as the cure for death is death.

Just as Jesus went through death on the cross in order to conquer death, the people had to face a lifted-up serpent in order to overcome the plague of serpents. By putting up a snake on a pole for all to see and confront, Moses as a leader made the people face what they feared, and God's power healed them.

One of the things I've sometimes been accused of dwelling on is family systems theory. I try not to drone on about it, and its not the end-all-be-all of theories, but I have found it to be helpful in ministry, in churches, and in life in general. I like the way the theories around this model have very practical implications.

At the center of family systems theory is a focus on anxiety. This model basically says that anxiety is always present, whether in individuals or in groups, and its important to see how we deal with anxiety. Again, anxiety is always present in life, but there are times and places where it spikes up or becomes endemic to a system.

Some of the prominent groups where anxiety moves about are in families, in work places, and in churches. And one of the things that often happens with anxiety is that when it gets out of control, people inevitably start dumping their anxiety on their leaders. We see this throughout the Bible and throughout the history of the church.

We've already seen how anxiety led the people in the wilderness to complain about not only Moses but about God. In the New Testament, people who were anxious about Jesus and his ministry ended up attacking him, and the theme continued on with Paul and his ministry as he spread the gospel.

One of the best interpreters of family systems theory for churches is Rev. Peter Steinke, a Lutheran minister and church consultant. In one of his books, he points out the Greek word *goggizo*, which can variously be translated as to grumble, to complain, to murmur, or to speak secretly. Not only were the Israelites guilty of this, but so were the Pharisees with Jesus and the Hellenists of Paul's time.

All of this of course prefigured complaining and grumbling in the contemporary church, or indeed in any group of people. Grumbling is just endemic to human beings. And yet how we deal with anxiety, whether in a healthy or unhealthy way, is centrally important to us as communities and as individuals.

When we can confront our fears and face them and name them, we have a better chance of dealing with

anxiety in a healthy way. When we let our fears overcome and overwhelm us, then we are more likely to blame, to attack and to abuse others, whether our leaders, other people in our church, or other people in our families, whether spouses, children, siblings or parents.

It all sounds easy when you explain it clearly and directly, but all of us have been both the victims and perpetrators of anxiety turned into attack and blame. Again, the healthiest thing for all of us is to face and deal with our anxiety, rather than to project it out on to others in the form of an attack.

Of course, as Christians, we know that just on our own power, we cannot do these things, and we need help from God to face and carry our anxiety in a way where it does not overcome us. In our better moments, we are able to look up to the cross and remember that not only did Jesus go through the worst suffering possible and go through death itself, but his paving the way can help us in our journeys.

Lent is a time for journeying into our brokenness and barrenness, to acknowledge them, as well as our anxiety, and to look to God and to Christ to help us with all of these things. Moses lifted up a staff in the wilderness to cure the people of death by snakes, and God lifted up the cross in history to lead the people through our fears, and towards new life.

All these things would be true any time, but they are also true in our current context of the pandemic, and our lives in the current moment. And right at this particular moment, we are at interesting place in terms of the pandemic and vaccinations and distancing. We are all watching the numbers of cases and vaccinations, and we are waiting for some kind of “new normal.”

I’ve mentioned this before, but I am glad to live in America and I am proud to be an American. Like any country, we have major problems that we are wrestling with, but having traveled the world some, I am happy to be here, even with all of the ongoing problems and issues we face.

And if I had to come up with adjectives for Americans and American culture, some of the words that often come up are energetic or dynamic. However, one of the words that does not often come up is patient. We are just not a patient people, in general. Maybe this is because we are a nation of immigrants, but patience has never been a defining trait of Americans.

This has been true throughout the generations, and it is true now. As we get closer to the “ending” of the pandemic, whatever that means, our impatience is showing, and our anxiety and grumbling are getting louder. People have complained about why the vaccine rollout hasn’t happened sooner, or why some people get vaccinated before others.

Some of this frustration is natural and understandable, but I think some of it is a product of all the anxiety we have all had to deal with over the past year or so. And at times like these, I think its helpful to take a step back, and take a deep breath, and really look at what we are afraid of. In a way, the things we fear during covid are the same as our usual fears.

We fear death, for ourselves and those we care about. We fear suffering. We fear the loss of a job or income or the loss of health. All of these things swirl around normally, but they have been intensified during this pandemic. Somehow, just naming our fears helps to reduce some of their power, rather than letting them fester unnoticed in the backs of our minds.

When the people in the desert could see their fears hoisted up in front of them, they were healed. When they repented of their sins to God and to their leaders, they were healed. When they did not confront their anxiety, they attacked both God and their leaders, and often tried to go backward in their journeys.

One pastor I know said that every church has a “lets go back to Egypt” committee. These are groups of people that always say how much better things were before, and how we should always go back to the way things were done before. But as Marta said last week, I think it is helpful at a time like this, and at all times, to have our eyes looking forward to where God may be leading.

Its interesting to me that in the desert, what God was really asking of the people was to trust. Even more than any specific thing to believe, God really wanted the people to trust. That’s the central issue for the people in the desert, for the people throughout the Bible, and for the people of God today, either during a pandemic or

any other time.

Its possible that during the pandemic, any one of us has been a bit more crabby and nit-picky than usual. Its understandable, given all the anxiety that is floating around. However, the direction of health is not to attack others as the target of our antagonism, but to confront our own anxiety, to repent of it, and not to let it overwhelm us.

So how do we do this? By keeping our eyes on Christ. By keeping our eyes on the cross, as we journey through Lent. As church leaders, we can't remove your anxiety, but we can point to the person who can help. We will get through this pandemic moment, just as we will travel through Lent, through the crucifixion, and to the new resurrection life that we find on Easter Sunday. Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH - from A Brief Statement of Faith

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God. Jesus proclaimed the reign of God; preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel. Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal. Amen.

Responding to God's Word

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

Holy God, you have called us to live before you and with one another in faithfulness. Unable to live as you intend, we inflict harm on others and on ourselves. In all these ways, we know we grieve your heart. Hear then, our prayers...

Restore us to communion with you and one another that we might live in the freedom you have given...

We pray for people who are victims of crime. We pray that those harmed will find healing and will live in safety...

We pray for healing and reconciliation where trust has been broken, hostility has flared, or misunderstanding has grown. Restore us not only to one another, but reconcile us to ourselves and to you...

We pray for those who are sick, in mind, body or spirit, for those lonely and isolated from community, for those burdened by guilt or grief, by depression or despair....

Send us out in love, with open eyes, ears and hearts. Make us true neighbors to one another and true children of your calling. We pray in the name of Christ, who taught us to pray...

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Sending of God's Word

CLOSING HYMN

To God Be the Glory

634

BENEDICTION

And now may the Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.

-Genesis, 31:49