

Welcome and Land Acknowledgement

As we gather in the name of Jesus we remember and acknowledge with gratitude the Lkwungen people – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ – on whose traditional and unceded territory we gather. As we remember let us also recommit to reconciling relationships.

➤ *Rise up, rise up*

130 MV (repeat)

Lenten Liturgy

The journey to Jerusalem is long. This is a wilderness journey and we are not always comfortable. But we trust and we persevere.

We are pilgrims on a journey. We are travelers on the road.

God's people are familiar with wilderness. After Egypt, they wandered in hunger and thirst – confused and tired – waiting for the promised land. Our destination is different. We aim for Jerusalem—where it all ends – and where there will be new beginnings.

We are pilgrims on a journey. We are travelers on the road.

Let us pray... **God of the wilderness, give us strength when we wander. When we stray and grieve, hunger and thirst, you have promised to make water spring up in the desert. Quench our thirst. Feed us with manna. Strengthen us when we are tired or lack trust. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen**

PWS&D Sharing **A Home Away from Home**

Accused of bewitching her niece after she fell ill, Zenabu Sugri began to fear for her safety in her own home.

In Ghana, where belief in witchcraft is widespread, it is often used to explain unusual and unfortunate events. Unfortunately, older women like Zenabu, are blamed and subjected to cruel treatment and discrimination when accused.

After suffering from relentless taunting, Zenabu found sanctuary at the PWS&D-supported Gambaga Camp—a refuge for women accused of witchcraft.

Zenabu has now found a sense of belonging with the community of women. At the camp, she's learned how to make soap and sells it to earn an income. *"It is peaceful. I am in good health and getting enough to eat,"* Zenabu shared.

This Lenten season faithfully respond to Christ's call to serve the marginalized. Through support for PWS&D, we can combat stigma and discrimination while supporting the vulnerable to lead peaceful and secure lives. www.werespond.ca / (416) 441-1111

† Prayer for Understanding

O God, we lift up our hearts to you with thanksgiving for your steadfast love that saves and heals. Open us to new possibilities in the scriptures today so that we may more fully live according to your divine purpose. Amen

Scripture

Numbers 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.

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.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message

It is now a year since we – like so many other congregations around the country and around the world – suspended public in-person worship. It has felt like a long and painful time – a kind of suffering we had never anticipated. Today’s passages raise a variety of questions about suffering and pain, as well as the divine quest for healing. Many of these questions have arisen over the past year, and have given rise to creative and compassionate or destructive and punitive theological reflection. Theological reflection has inspired social responsibility, compassion for neighbors, and support of the emerging science regarding COVID. Theological reflection has also led to congregational irresponsibility, COVID and science denial, and violence.

The readings today describe an ambiguity in divinity. Though they speak of divine rescue and global love, they also suggest a dark side to divinity. God causes suffering and may be the source of punishment that far exceeds our misdeeds. These passages invite us to consider the relationship between grace, punishment, and personal responsibility. They also invite us to ask questions of God: *Is God the source of punishment? Do certain behaviors lead to negative outcomes that alienate us from God’s vision for our lives? Does God’s orderly universe both harm and heal, such that we must accept both as coming from the hand of a loving God?*

So far in our Lenten journey this year, we have focused on the theme of God’s covenant – with Noah and all creation – with Abraham, Sarah and their descendants. Last week as we celebrated the work of PWS&D we missed the reading from Exodus about the ten commandments – God’s covenant with Israel at Sinai. Next week is the divine covenant with the world as promised through Jeremiah’s words to the exiles. In our reading for today, we have a vivid picture of covenant broken by Israel and restored by an angry but ultimately gracious God.

This text is so appropriate for Lent, because it gives us an opportunity to reflect on our stubborn rebellion against God and on God’s redemption. Yet you likely know by now that I don’t read the text literally and encourage you to think beyond the literal meaning as well. Here is how I understand it...

The people escape from slavery in Egypt hoping to settle down in peace and harmony but instead spend 40 years – a generation – wandering in the wilderness. They are sick of the meagre food and funky water – tired of moving from place to place – losing faith in God and one another. They have had enough. *“They became impatient on the way...”*

That’s understandable. We know a bit about impatience in our current circumstance. But they took their impatience perhaps a bit too far, railing against divine providence. And then the snakes showed up! They thought things couldn’t get any worse but they did. People died from the snake bites and the people were desperately afraid – afraid that their rebellion and rejection of God had caused this plague. So they prayed for deliverance yet again – hoping against hope that God would hear and respond.

Of course God does respond – through Moses – giving the people a remedy and renewed hope. They made a snake image for those who were bitten to gaze upon and thus be healed. It is a strange remedy indeed and a bizarre story. But perhaps not so strange after all...

Think about it... Science often uses the cause of a disease as a cure for the disease. Many vaccines are composed of dead viruses or parts of viruses. I don't know if that is the case with the current vaccines, but I do know that anti-venom is made by taking a bit of venom and inserting it in an animal which then creates the anti-venom which will cure the person who is bitten by a poisonous snake.

Part of the reason for the raging spread of the coronavirus is that people are impatient with the length of our journey through this wilderness of COVID-19 and with all the restrictions and hardships imposed on us by the disease. So, many reject or resent the very measures that will help conquer this pandemic – from wearing masks to getting vaccinated. Our impatience may be the very thing that kills many people – as was the case with Israel.

What if this story is intended as a metaphor. To remind us that we often walk in circles when it comes to our sin – our separation from God and from the divine love we are called upon to share. What if this story is to help us remember our own impatience with God – our own moments of despair and rebellion.

That is certainly part of what the season of Lent is about – remembering that we are ever-sinful. Perhaps this strange story about snakes is to help us remember the stories of our own sin – not for the purpose of shame but so that we can recognize grace – God as source of healing and life.

From Mount Hor to the Red Sea, the snakes of fear and anxiety trail the people – their serpentine mouths gaping to bite with poison – lashing out at the people's heels – twisting around and among them. Then it turns out that the only solution to the infestation is to look directly at the serpents – to name the problem, the poison – to gaze honestly at the plague – to own up to the sin and doubt that brought the serpents into their midst.

To be healed, the people have to see the source of death. To be restored, they have to repent of their death-perpetuating behaviors. To return to fullness of life, they have to remember what they would prefer to forget – not only their loud complaining against God and Moses, but also the brutal pain of life in Egypt. And more than that, they have to remember what it is so easy to forget – that God's grace is abundant and unearned – that God's salvation comes from the wellspring of God's love and not from condemnation.

When will we be ready to face not only our own sin, but the sins and mechanisms of death among us – systemic sin that perpetuates racism and yawning gaps between those who are rich, those getting by okay, and those who are struggling?

To be healed, we must recognize the source of death, even if it is ourselves and the systems that seem comfortable to us.

To be restored, we must repent of death-perpetuating behaviors – overt sexism, racism, agism, classism and all the insidious microaggressions that persist.

To return to fullness of life, we must remember what we would prefer to forget – the pain of our history: as individuals, communities, churches and as a society. And more than that, we must recognize what is so easy to forget – that gazing at Jesus on the cross must go hand-in-hand with gazing honestly at one another and with action to heal the hurts we participate in.

Maybe it is not such a strange remedy after all if the point of the story is that God is intent on providing healing. God's desire for restoration persists not only when we are sick or broken because of circumstances beyond our control, but also in those times when our own choices have brought about what ails us.

When our brokenness is so severe as to cause a kind of death, God's pervasive mercy and love, made evident in Christ, can bring us back to life. When new life comes – when healing arrives – it doesn't always look like we hope. Sometimes healing doesn't equate with curing – doesn't fix the underlying cause of our pain – and this can be bitter indeed. In the midst of this, our texts today bear witness to a God who ceaselessly, stubbornly works to make a path to wholeness.

They cried to the Lord in their trouble, and God saved them from their distress.

➤ *Lift high the cross (verses 1, 3, 4)*

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† Prayer (from Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22)¹

We come to you in prayer, O God. We know your steadfast love endures forever.

We pray for a world that is sick through our sinful ways, with an environment that is out of balance, with economies that are out of balance, with nations and races that are out of balance. We pray to you; come save us.

We pray for people in places of conflict and danger this day... For those who give their lives to keep families, friends, and neighbours safe... We pray for our leaders...

(Silence)

We come to you in prayer, O God. We know your steadfast love endures forever.

We pray for a people who are sick and afflicted through our sinful ways, sick and afflicted through broken relationships, sick and afflicted because of hunger and poverty, sick and afflicted because of bodies distressed and near death. We pray to you; come heal us.

We pray for those who are imprisoned or alone today... For those who are ill or infirm...

¹ Reformed Worship 90, page 25ff.

For those who mourn...

(Silence)

We come to you in prayer, O God. We know your steadfast love endures forever.

We pray for your church, sent to heal and deliver our world but beset by fears, bogged down by petty problems, broken by stingy ears and overly lavish egos. We pray to you; come gather us at your table.

We pray for this congregation gathered here...

(Silence)

We come to you in prayer, O God.

We thank you for your steadfast love and your wonderful works. Remake our lives as thanksgiving sacrifices. Send us forth to tell of your deeds with songs of joy. Hear these and all our prayers, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, whom you sent to save us and who asks us to pray together... ***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, for ever. Amen***

➤ ***Precious Lord, take my hand***

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† Offering and Prayer

The season of Lent leads us on, closer and closer to the cross. As we contemplate Jesus lifted up for our sakes, consider what the gift of his mercy and grace means for you. Let your offering express your thanksgiving for such an amazing gift.

Lord Jesus, you gave so much without counting the cost. Bless these gifts with your generous love. Send them and us into the world to bless it with the same hope and healing we have found in you. Amen

Blessing

We have traveled together in the wilderness – confronting our uncertainty. Continue now on the path, knowing that God shares in the journey – so we need never hunger. And may the grace of the Living Christ, the love of God, and the nurturing community of the Holy Spirit embrace us all. Amen

➤ ***Go now in peace***

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