

March 14, 2021 4th Sunday of Lent
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Numbers 21:4-9, Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22
Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21

[Reference to this interview (with a quote from James Baldwin): <https://onbeing.org/programs/rev-otis-moss-iii-the-sound-of-the-genuine-traversing-2020-with-the-mystic-of-the-movement-howard-thurman/>]

Grace and mercy to you, in the name of the Creator, the Savior, the Sustainer. Amen.

I am intrigued by the interplay between the reading from Numbers and the gospel from John.

The gospel is actually the end of a heavy-duty conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus.

Nicodemus has come by night, a Jewish leader risking it all,

driven by curiosity, searching,

desperate to understand and believe.

As they talk, Jesus recalls to Nicodemus that old story from the time of the Exodus,

our first reading this morning.

Surely Nicodemus knew it well and can imagine in his mind's-eye the Israelites,

weary from the years on the move,

impatient-as-ever, forgetting why this journey is important,

cranky about the food.

How hard it must have been to keep on trusting God and God's care through those wilderness years!

If we look back (and Nicodemus and Jesus both know this), God's compassion for the complaints of the Israelites has been extensive.

When the people murmured and fretted, God provided manna.

When they were thirsty, God gave them water from the rock.

This time, though, God presses them, God meets their complaints, their sin, their lack of trust, with poisonous snakes hissing at their ankles.

Why does it play out this way? Why do snakes get a bad rap?

Good questions for another sermon.

Facing these snakes, though, the people are quickly crying for help and confessing.

That's when God instructs Moses with that weird and elaborate plan to hoist a bronze serpent on a pole, a saving symbol that the people could look to for healing.

They needed to look at the snake, they needed to face the consequence of their sin.

That's how they'd be healed: by facing their struggle to trust the one who led them through the night.

Let me say that again. for clearly this is about more than just the Israelite's struggle to trust.

It's about more than just Nicodemus' search.

This is about **our** healing, about the world's healing:

They – WE - are healed by facing our struggle to trust the one who leads us through the night,
our struggle to trust the one who cares for us with mercy that endures beyond our comprehension.

When Jesus and Nicodemus talk, trust is at the center of their conversation.

Oh, I know, these much-loved passages like John 3:16 are translated with the word Believe.

“For God so loved the world that God sent the son, that whoever believes in him... “

Honestly, a better translation is: “whoever Trusts in him”

This is not some theoretical feat with a certain doctrine.

This is not some head-thing, but it's trust: day by day, stake-your-life-on-it,
in-the-good-times-and-in-the-muck, trust.

We are healed by facing our struggle to trust the one whose mercy endures.

Can I get an Amen?

We are healed by facing our delusions that we can go it on our own.

We are healed by acknowledging the exhaustion that grips us,
the temptation to just throw up our hands, to give up.

The Israelites look to the bronze serpent on the pole to be healed, we look to the cross.

For the cross holds our healing,

but it also reminds us of humanity's sin.

humanity's refusal to trust Jesus' radical way of love, God's will for the whole creation.

It was a year ago this Sunday that we waded into this virtual community life as COVID spread.

Remember the news of those days?

We canceled in-person worship,

sending out emails pointing you to links that many didn't know how to access,

enduring plenty of tech trouble,

naively hoping we'd be together again by Easter—little did we know!

We've learned a lot in this year, and not simply about online worship,

but about what it means to trust and how strong God's mercy can be.

While I hear from many a spiritual yearning (for this online-life has its limits),

I've also witnessed a spiritual renewal in this community, a renewal that is palpable.

COVID has pushed us to clarify our priorities.

It has brought us to our knees.

And healing will come as we more and more are able to face the sin and distrust that has laced its way through this impossible year.

Here my invitation for you this week:

Keep a watch for the times and places where trusting God is hardest,
most challenging for you, for our world.

When you notice these, then get curious about healing,
about how God would have us face this struggle to trust.

What might God put on the pole, if you will, so that we are over and over caused to face it head on?

I've been pondering this in relation to climate and the environment.

There's something frighteningly ironic about imagining the black snake of the pipelines in this way. This is not just about facing our sin generally (though that's a help), but most truly, most deeply, it's about facing how our lack of trust IS our sin, how our struggle to trust the creator of the universe, the savior of our lives IS our sin.

With jury selection underway for Chauvin's trial, I've also been thinking about lament.

In an On Being interview with Krista Tippett, Pastor Otis Moss recalls the days after George Floyd's murder. He says, "We have to learn how to lament. Our hearts have to break in the way that God's heart breaks..." And then he references James Baldwin, saying:

"I think Baldwin is best when he says, not everything you face can be changed;
but not until you face it can it be changed,"
and then Pastor Moss adds, "we just have this proclivity to not want to face tragedy."

If this morning is about anything, it's about trust, it's about facing what needs change, what needs healing.

The pole with the bronze serpent, the cross, the deep grief of loss, the lament of injustice, the struggle to trust, to truly trust God's care in this season, in every season, that is at the heart of it. Oh, we'd like to look away, that's always our first instinct. And yet healing comes when we gather our courage and face this hard stuff head on. The promise endures: God's mercy meets us. God's graces saves us. Healing begins right here - thanks be to God. Amen.