

Sermon for Lent 4B  
Sunday, March 10, 2024  
“Healing antidote for our suffering”

Text: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Suffering is a painful topic. We don't like to think about human suffering. We don't want to suffer, and we often wonder why suffering happens. Suffering makes us question why God allows suffering in the world, in those we love, in ourselves. Why do bad things happen to good people? Suffering makes us question if God even cares. But, one of the painful realities of the human condition is that suffering is inevitable. Today, in our journey through Lent, we are forced to confront a topic that we'd rather avoid and wish would just go away.

In the Old Testament lesson from the Book of Numbers, the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness. In fact, the Hebrew name for the Book of Numbers is *b'midbar*, 'from the wilderness.' They had been wandering in the wilderness after their miraculous exodus from Egypt for a very, very long time—40 years when all was said and done—and they were tired of wandering. They were tired of struggling. They had just won a big battle against the Caananites; they were tired of fighting. They were tired of suffering. Many times, they grumbled and complained against Moses, but this time, they directed their anger and frustration at God himself: “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.” And how did God respond? He sent them poisonous serpents that bit the people and many died. Huh? *We prayed to you, God, that we are suffering and things got worse! Why are you letting this happen?*

How often do we feel like the Israelites? It seems like suffering is happening all around us, and no end seems in sight. Pictures from Gaza flood our screens; we see hundreds and thousands of innocent people suffering by the actions of modern-day Israelites in what they say is an effort to rid their land of Hamas, and no end seems in sight. People are suffering in Ukraine and in many other places around the world, and the power mongers don't seem to be backing down—they seem to be gaining strength! We are worried about things going on in our nation, who's going to lead us. We are concerned about things going on in our city, who's going to protect us. We are worried about struggles going on in our personal lives, who is going to help us. Some of us may be dealing with sickness of those we love or in our own bodies, if we are going to be here tomorrow. Who is going to heal us? Where is God?

“Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress,” so says Psalm 19. Psalm 19 gives us a ray of hope. Over and over again, when the Israelites struggled, God delivered them from their distress. When they found themselves dying from the venom of poisonous snakes, they repented for having

complained and they prayed to God, who told Moses to make a serpent to protect them. Anyone who gazed upon the serpent of bronze lived.

Any struggle that you are going through right now, anything that you're worried about right now, anything that is weighing heavy on your heart in this moment, all you have to do is cry to the Lord in your trouble, and he will deliver you from your distress. Because, God knows about our struggles, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16, KJV) Even God himself, when he became human and lived among us, did not escape struggle and suffering; he endured criticism, disbelief, arrest, torture, and crucifixion. He didn't even come here in his Incarnation to swoop down and instantaneously rid the world of its ills. The message that we're supposed to take away today is that God is with us at all times to get us through the difficulties that we are facing and will face.

Remember that poem, *Footsteps in the Sand*? Most of us have heard it somewhere. When I was growing up, it seemed to be a popular reading at graduation ceremonies. You remember the gist of it: the narrator is looking at his or her life as footsteps on a beach and sees that usually there are two sets of footprints. But then in times of that person's greatest struggles, there was only one set of footprints. They asked God, "Why did you leave me in the lowest points of my life?" to which God responded, "It was in those times that I carried you." All you have to do is cry to the Lord in your distress, and he will deliver you.

The season of Lent reminds us over and over again that we have no power within ourselves to help ourselves, as we heard in last Sunday's opening collect. Lent reminds us that we depend on God: his love, his mercy, and his faithfulness. God never leaves us, and even though suffering in our own lives or in the world is going to happen whether we like it or not, God can and will get us through it, if we let him. He will give us strength and we will be better for it on the other side...even if the other side is in the next world. Sometimes death *is* our delivery.

And that's OK. It's all in God's hands. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ reminds us that even after we experience the worst that life can give us, something greater and unending awaits us. All we have to do is believe, "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."

The Israelites looked upon a serpent of bronze and they were saved. We have God, who is really and fully present among us in body, soul, and divinity in the Holy Eucharist. When we partake of it, we carry Christ within us to help us through life in the real world and to offer hope to others that when we cry to the Lord in our distress, he will deliver. Let us give thanks to the Lord for his mercy and the wonders he does for his children. Amen.