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St. John | San Juan Episcopal Church  
Olympia, WA  
Sunday, March 10, 2024  
Lent IV – Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

*I speak to you in the name of our loving, liberating, life-giving God. Amen.*

In the Hebrew scriptures, the Book of Numbers is the story of the Israelites learning to live together as refugees, looking for a new place to call home. The Israelites are exhausted. They're on edge. They have no idea how long it will be before they find a place to rest, a place where they're safe, much less a place to call home. Their life is *hard*, and in their weariness and restlessness, they find it hard to trust God, even though God parted the Red Sea and delivered them from slavery in Egypt.

Reading through the Book of Numbers reveals a pattern in the relationship between the Israelites and their God. The Israelites struggle, they cry out to God, God provides for them, the Israelites are relieved and reassured, and they continue travelling. Then the Israelites suffer some disappointment or setback, and the whole process starts all over again. The Israelites wonder, "Is it worth it to trust God? Would life have been better if we stayed in slavery in Egypt?" And God wonders, "What was I thinking? THESE are my chosen people?"

But the Hebrew scriptures, along with the New Testament, show us that God has never completely given up on God's people – and God's people have never completely forsaken their God.

In today's lesson from the Hebrew scriptures, the Israelites are restless and petulant. The situation reminds me of a scene that you, too, might be familiar with: teenagers standing in front of the refrigerator with the door open, *the day after you've been to the grocery store*, saying, "Mom, why isn't there anything to eat around here?"

The Israelites say to God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and water, and we detest this miserable food."

Just one – ONE – chapter before the story we read today, the Israelites complained that they didn't have enough water to drink and God provided water for them by causing water to flow out of a rock after Moses hit it with his staff. You would think that such a powerful display of provision would cause the Israelites to trust God – but no.

What God wants from the Israelites is the same thing God has wanted from people since God created Adam and Eve. God wants to love people, to care for us, to share God's power with us, and so that we can be in relationship with God, co-creating with God.

But there are SO many ways for relationships to go wrong.

In response to the Israelites' complaints, what does God do? God does *not* say, "Ahh. It's ok that you're scared and behaving badly. I'll fix it." Nope. The scriptures tell us that God sent snakes to bite the people – and that some of them died.

Now, before you and I go judging God for this approach to parenting God's children, let's you and I as parents – or grandparents, or aunts or uncles – just ask ourselves, have we ever disciplined our children in a way that appeared unloving?

Whether or not we understand or approve of God's approach, it had the desired effect: the people repented of their petulance and disrespect. Moses prayed for them. And – once again – God made a way for God's relationship with God's chosen people to be mended. He asked Moses to make a serpent and put it on a pole – and to tell the people that if they would look at the serpent, they would live.

Fast forward more than 3,460 years, to . . . today. It seems to me that we're still pretty much wandering in the desert. At least it feels like it. Maslow's hierarchy of needs tells us that even if we have air, food, water, clothing and shelter, if we don't feel safe,<sup>1</sup> it's as if we are wandering in a desert.

What gets us out of that desert? Connection. Connection with family and community and God.

It's hard to establish and maintain those connections if we can't or don't or won't trust each other and God. And if we're honest, each of us have our reasons for not trusting. Disappointments. Fears. Times we feel that not only other people but also GOD have flat out abandoned or betrayed us.

The Good News is that our God, the God of all creation, did not give up on the Israelites and does not give up on us. God knows what we need in our wandering. God notices and cares about our disorientation and our suffering. And God comes again and again to connect with us, to save us.

Today's Gospel lesson bridges the story of the Israelites into our lives today . . . Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, comes to Jesus acknowledging that he doesn't understand what's going on and longing to connect with God more deeply.

After some back and forth, Jesus' basically says, remember when God gave the Israelites a way to live and not die? Well, here's how YOU can live and not die: believe and you will have eternal life.

This believing that Jesus invites Nicodemus to do is not about understanding God and thinking right. This believing is about trusting God and doing right.

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<sup>1</sup> Maslow's hierarchy of needs – <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

Biblical scholar Jouette Bassler, professor emeritus at SMU, points out that, “The verb ‘believe’ appears more frequently in John than in any other New Testament writing, but the noun ‘faith’ is completely absent.” Think about that . . . Bassler continues, “Since verbs imply action,” what Jesus is doing here is placing “strong emphasis on the dynamic aspects of believing.”

You see, Jesus says to Nicodemus, God so loved the world that God has already acted – again – to connect with anyone and everyone who will respond. And the response is God looking for, hoping for? In verse 21, Jesus says, “those who *do what is true* come into the light.”

Dear People of God, when you’re wandering in the desert of despair or loneliness or loss or pain, when life is hard, remember that God is already reaching out to you in love. God’s initiation gives you strength to do what God asks you to do in return, which is simply the next true thing you know to do. And as you do the next true thing you know to do, you will indeed, as Jesus promised, “come into the light.” The light of God’s love, the light of God’s peace, the light of connection with God and others, the light of hope.

Amen.