
LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR B

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FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR B

Numbers 21.4–9; Psalm 107.1–3, 17–22; Ephesians 2.1–10; John 3.14–21

Welcome to the fourth study of the Sunday readings in Lent. Our readings from the Old Testament for the first three Sundays have set us on a trek with God and Israel setting the foundations that culminate in unexpected ways in the stories of Jesus but confrontingly, the stories that surround cross and its meaning. We have spoken of covenants (Noah, Abraham and Moses/Sinai) and of Israel being covenant partners with God in a new way for the renewal of the world.

This week we trek with Israel and find ourselves immersed in a murkier world of division, conflict and possible insurrection.

The scene has shifted. The theophany of Sinai is just old peoples' reminiscences around the campfire in this story. Forty years of wandering around the southern borderlands of Canaan has dimmed their memories of the Exodus and its rebuttal of the power of empire and the sense of new found liberty in the promise of a homeland. All they remember of that great event is found in Numbers 11.4–6

Numbers 21.4–9

⁴The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! ⁵We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; ⁶but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.'

That's all. So much for God's great saving act. Read on in Numbers 21.

⁴From 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. ⁵The 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.’ ⁶Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The 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. ⁸And 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.’ ⁹So 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.

They are taking a trek, a long trek, to avoid tangling with the kingdom of Edom whose ruler has refused them entry. It’s hard to blame him. They have inflicted damage on other petty rulers along the way but they also seem like an unstable and dangerous rabble that is willing to threaten to overthrow their own leadership (Moses) from time to time. No one wants a plague like this passing through their land.

The forty years, which we have missed in our reading cycle, have been turbulent. They might have entered the land many years before, but they trusted liars who peddled fear of exaggerated danger instead of trusting truth tellers like Joshua and Caleb. They had advised the people “The Lord is with us; do not fear them” (Nu 14.9). Of course that latter advice seemed rather slim and more risky so they spent 40 years trekking in a desert instead. We are approaching the end of that part of the story.

They want to get around Edom onto the eastern side of the Dead Sea and the Jordan. Edom’s refusal forced them to take a more circuitous route. On the way the issue of fine dining arises again. Complaining along the way has become common and Moses has had to learn to lead them through that.

But can you see why this one is so serious? What do you think it means to mount an insurrection against both God and Moses? Think back to last week’s study. What are the first couple of commandments about? We suggested then that they are at the core of the covenant and what it means to be a covenant partner with God. There is no life threatening crisis here but it does bring on an impatient and bad-tempered tirade. I don’t know how it strikes you but the demand strikes me as a “what do we want? When do we want it?” moment with an implied threat. If we don’t get what we want we will . . . Fill in the dots.

What do you make of God’s reaction? Is this God acting on a whim? God being unfair? Do human beings have responsibility in their interactions with God? What are the responsibilities of covenant partners in God’s renewal of the world? These are all weighty questions so take time to reflect on them.

Have you noticed the paradoxical role of the snakes? What do you think about that? How can something both destroy and heal? What makes the difference? Someone has

said that actions by Israel determine whether the snakes are agents of death or life. What actions would they be?

What message does this story convey to the reader concerning God and his people?

Once again, we are invited to pray the psalm in response to the reading from Numbers. Read it through and see how you might do that.

Psalm 107.1–3, 17–22

¹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures for ever.

²Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those he redeemed from trouble

³and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

¹⁷Some were sick through their sinful ways,
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;

¹⁸they loathed any kind of food,
and they drew near to the gates of death.

¹⁹Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;

²⁰he sent out his word and healed them,
and delivered them from destruction.

²¹Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.

²²And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

This delightful hymn of praise begins by celebrating God's eternal and unshakeable steadfast love (or covenant love). That love extends to people from all points of the compass from which he has delivered them from their oppressors. He redeems them in steadfast love and gathers them into his joy.

How do you celebrate God's steadfast love? Do we do this well when we meet? How might this become an enlivening part of our life together?

The psalm goes on to tell of the kind of people God redeems from the hands of the oppressor. It tells of a group of wanderers lost in a desert who find a destination that meets their needs (4–9) and of prisoners who are set free (10–16). In verses (17–22) it describes sick persons who are healed and in 23–32 the plight of sailors in a shipwreck are saved.

These are pictures drawn to excite our imaginations at the wonderful redemptive covenant love of the Lord. Our vignette concerns people who through their foolishness bring sickness upon themselves and transgress the law.

Read 17–22 through again and, remembering its context, ask yourself how it speaks to you. This poem is made up of a precise format.

Verses 17–18 describe the distress. What is it? The word ‘sick’ is normally translated ‘foolish person’ and usually means a person who acts unwisely, without reference to God, and that foolishness can create dangerous situations (see the book of Proverbs). They were in very dire situation indeed.

In verse 19 the sick cry out to the Lord. Once again the redeeming covenant love of God

Verse 20 tells us how; through the Lord’s healing word. At death’s door the word of healing draws them back to life and health.

Thanksgiving and the joy of praise are the only response (21–22).

This passage does raise the thorny issue of sickness, guilt, and punishment. We have grown up in modernity with a different model of causation to these ancient people. But this passage is not talking about causation. The point in this passage is not that God punishes for self-inflicted injury and the consequences that flow from that, but rather that God heals and redeems and gathers those people.

And for that we rejoice. Human healing requires the wonders of modern medicine as a necessary component. That is a product of our role as stewards of God’s created order. But we also know that often people require more for their healing; friendship, family, acceptance, love, meaning, joy and peaceful space.

How can we become God’s covenant partners in the healing he seeks in his creation?

Perhaps this little excerpt from the letter to the Ephesians can help us answering that last question and progressing our trek. One of the themes of this letter is that of power and especially God’s great power seen and experienced in the resurrection of Christ. Symbols of power abounded in Ephesus as the archaeological remains testify. They are breathtaking in their sweep; political, economic, intellectual religious and magical. Paul’s prayer in 1.15–23 is that the church as the body and fullness of the risen Christ would live in this resurrection power as a counter to the powers displayed in the public arenas and private homes of Ephesus.

In this passage he reminds the readers (mostly Gentile) of where they started the journey as covenant partners with God and how they came to life. Read on

Ephesians 2.1–10

²You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God,

who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Read verses 1–3 carefully.

It is Paul's brief and unflattering theological portrayal of humankind that has taken a wrong turn and finds itself heading into the oppression of a foreign despot. It is figurative but confronting reminder to the church in Ephesus and elsewhere about the theological predicament they were in. In other words, it describes where they stood in relation to God's great plan to renew his creation and the human order in it.

They were heading off to a regime that would use its power to deface creation, and bring its human subjects undone and into oppression. Paul uses images like 'ruler of the power of the air' to describe the source of the spiritual direction they had taken previously and where it led; the oppression and slavery of death, the final bringing of God's grand design undone in the unravelling of human life. That is reflected in human life in what Paul calls 'the desires of flesh and senses.' We have trivialised this to mean sex. So we can sweep what Paul says under the carpet.

He also describes this path as 'following the course of this world.' The 'ruler of the power of the air' uses mundane very earthly love of power to bring it all undone. Remember Jesus' temptations? What do they tell us? Naked power, self's desires first and only, untrammelled autonomy, and the desire for adulation and celebrity, and using god as a magic trick, the god of the tight corners.

It may feel uncomfortable and alien not only because of the figurative language but also because we have become used to thinking that there is not much wrong with the human race, that it is progressing to a beautiful future with righteous humans governing this utopian future and needs no outside help. Is there a problem with that?

What feels most alien to you in this description? What rings true? Remember the command about idolatry last week? Can that help here? What do you make of Paul's idea that we really need to grasp this so that we take God's journey into God's future?

To that we turn.

What a delight to read 4–7. Savour these words. We move from darkness to light, from oppression to love, from death to life.

What effect do they have on you? What is your response to the claim that God doesn't leave us mired in oppression but raises us up with Christ Jesus? Some people think that God is stingy, small minded and mean. How does that picture measure up with the picture given here?

What is God rich in? With whom does he share those riches? What does it mean for you that you are raised up with Christ and seated with him? Meditate on the imagery. Remember that this is the promise and vocation of our baptism.

Someone has suggested that the resurrection of Jesus is crucial. Take it away and what you see is all there is, at least as far as anybody knows. What is your response to that?

How do Paul's words in 4–7 indicate to us the transformations that our ongoing salvation makes to us? Reflect on verses 1–3 again and what they have been released from. What difference has being seated with Christ made? How are we continually being saved? What do you think it means that we reign with Christ now? What difference does that make for you and your vocation in the world?

For the moment all this passes unseen and despised. But some time God's immeasurable richness towards us will be put on full display. Do you look forward to that? And how might it guide you now?

In verses 8–10 Paul picks up something he said in verse 5 "by grace you have been saved" and explains it. Salvation is all the work and gift of God. The dead are feely given life. We have been restored to life. The dead can't raise themselves. We cannot save ourselves.

The dead who are graciously given life now have a vocation. Paul doesn't describe what the works are in this brief summary but we know from elsewhere that they are works that display in our personal lives and our life together what a renewed world might look like. Paul lists as fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5.22–23 love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. This is not an exhaustive list and it is not a checklist either, that I can tick off when I achieve one or the other. They are a way of living salvation and giving hope to the world that death is not the last word.

In v10 we are told that we are what God has made us, God's workmanship just like creation. We are like God's work of art, God's poem, God's picture, sculpture or musical score. Reflect on that. What are you? How does God's rich life find its expression in you?

What happens to us spiritually and morally do you think if we never grasp that everything flows from the richness of God's grace? You might like to meditate on the story in Luke 7.36–50. Take time to compare the story and this short extract from Paul.

Read this story through carefully and quietly keeping in mind the passage from Numbers that we reflected on earlier.

John 3.14–21

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶For 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.

¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those 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. ¹⁹And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But 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.'

In my years in Kenya I had a friend who delighted in catching butterflies especially in the highland rainforest areas. His pleaded with me to go with him on these expeditions to protect him from the snakes. I had been around a lot longer and knew the rainforest better but . . . None of my African friends would come with me because of the terror of the snake which carried a whole mythical world of disaster and evil along with its propensity to strike. But someone had to pay attention to the snakes because my friend was lost in world of beautiful butterflies.

What a powerful image the snake is and has been in human life and its mythologies. Jesus' image refers back to our first story in Numbers which he translates to his own ministry.

What particular event in his life does he apply to and how does that help your understanding of that event? (A clue is found in the image of 'lifted up'.)

How does Jesus apply the paradoxical nature of the snake to himself? Does that give us insight into what Jesus does when he is 'lifted up?'

What is the means by which the onlooker to the lifting up makes it his or her own? Relate that to the Numbers story.

This is what God's love looks like. John 3.16 is one of the most well-known verses of the New Testament. Its familiarity should not blind us to its simple beauty and powerful, engaging force. Take some time here. Every word counts. See if you can find new things that encourage you or pull you up short.

It is important to remember that eternal life in John's Gospel does not mean 'going to heaven when we die.' Eternal life is John's way of saying that in Jesus God's promise of the age to come, what I have been calling the renewal of the world, is beginning

now and it begins in human life when someone trusts the healing work of Jesus on the cross.

The tough part of this saying of Jesus is 17–21. Read them carefully.

What does Jesus (17) say God's purpose is for human beings and the world? Reflect on that. Meditate on it.

Again, what is the means by which a person can lay hold of this love?

In 1.1–4 John has already used the metaphor of light and darkness. The light and all it offers faces rejection. Here darkness covers evil deeds. We have a common saying, 'Shine a light on it' or 'Let the sun shine in'. God lets the sun shine in on human life and it retreats to the dark, because some do not want to let go of the will to power, autonomy from all constraint, violence, the use of the lie to dominate, the use of others as means to our ends, or the economics of inequality. All of these can be broken down into tiny shards in our lives. We shrink into the dark. Such 'darkness' is destroying the good creation of God and preventing people coming forward into God's new world and living in that.

This gospel reading is packed full of delightful and confronting material. Meditate on it. How does it speak to you?

Take time to reflect on where you have come to in this Lenten journey. Be sure that you take time for quiet. Be still and know that I am God.