

Randall D. Koehler

Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Numbers 21:1-9

14 March 2021

Deep Healing

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning! Thank you for participating in our virtual worship service. We are especially aware this morning that we worship in limited forms, but we earnestly await a soon-coming day when normalcy returns. Let us pray. God of deep and true healing, healing of our minds, hearts, bodies, and relationships, you have sought us out and provided the way for us. Give us the strength to face our fears, our doubts, our brokenness, our sin, and our shame. Help us find healing in those moments when we turn and face the consequences of our actions, when we realize and admit how we have strayed from the deep and true way of Jesus. Fill our time together this morning with your spirit and truth. Inspire us to listen closely and discern how you are speaking to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

This morning is the fourth week of our Lenten journey: Deep Healing. In the last few weeks, we have explored those parts of our lives that are deep and true: relationship, commitment, wisdom, and now healing. We know that deep relationship requires deep commitment accompanied by deep wisdom. Maintaining relationships also requires deep healing because we, as God's image-bearers, are broken and sinful. We reflect the image of God to all of creation poorly, but as we continue on each of our journeys, we are steadily transformed into a more accurate reflection of who God is and who we are meant to be in God's world. The scriptures and our Lenten series begin with three important covenants. Noah and the rainbow were first in Genesis 9, revealing God's commitment to deep relationship with all of creation.

Abraham and circumcision were second in Genesis 17, revealing God's desire for deep commitment between God's self and a particular person and their descendants. Finally, Moses and the stone tablets were third in Exodus 20, revealing God's desire for all people to embody God's wisdom revealed specifically in that story through the ten commandments.

Almost 40 years have passed between last week's story at Mount Sinai and today's story in the wilderness between the mountain and the promised land. According to the book of Numbers, the Israelites spend a year at the base of Mount Sinai. Fearing that Moses has died on the mountain, the people convince Moses's brother Aaron to cast an image of the god that had led them out of Egypt, a golden calf. They begin worshipping this calf while Moses is still with God on the mountain, showing how quickly the people will abandon the commitments that they had made to YHWH, the true God that had led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and to this mountain. After the golden calf, YHWH is ready to end the covenant, but Moses convinces God to hold on. Moses then crushes the calf, mixes it with water, and makes the people drink the bitter water, and God follows with a plague on the camp. At the foot of Mount Sinai, Exodus ends with the construction of the tent of meeting, the place where God's presence will dwell first outside and then within the Israelite camp as a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. All of Leviticus and the beginning of Numbers explore the rest of the year at Sinai. In Numbers chapter 10, the people leave the mountain for the promised land.

Numbers is the Greek name for this book, inspired by the census that is taken of the Israelite people in chapters 1 and 26. The Hebrew name for this book means "in the wilderness," a much more insightful title for our time this morning. The wilderness becomes the place of testing for this new covenant people, who have God's presence always in the midst of them as they journey toward God's promises. Keeping the people on track as they go is the key difficulty

for Moses and the other leaders of the people. The people are always looking backward to their time in Egypt, romanticizing it as though their time in the wilderness with only manna and quail to eat is no better than Egyptian slavery. Their lack of vision and trust in what God is doing and where God is leading causes them to fear the unknown ahead of them and around them in the wilderness. Between Numbers 10 and 21, there are 7 key situations in the wilderness, of which the central moment the twelve spies scouting the promised land. They must decide if the people can invade the land and take it over. Out of the 12 that go, only 2 believe that they can take the land with God's help: Caleb and Joshua, two important leaders of the younger generation. The older generation had witnessed the plagues in Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the thunder and lightning at Mount Sinai, and the pillar of cloud and fire, yet they still struggle to see themselves in the promised land. Because of their lack of confidence and trust, God leads them back into the wilderness to wander until the older generation has passed on, summed up in the 40 years that they will wait until God leads them again to the edge of the land.

Our story this morning in Numbers 21 is the turning point that God has predicted. The forty years are coming to an end. This seventh and final experience will prove to be the transition that triggers God's leading again to the border of promise. The older generation had been defeated at Hormah just after the people had heard the 12 spies' report thirty-something years earlier. Showing their slow change in attitude as the younger generation who grew up in the wilderness becomes a larger proportion of the group, the people ask God in Numbers 21:1-3 to be with them when they battle the King of Arad, and God grants them victory. They must devote the spoils of their battle to destruction, a sacrifice to God in gratitude for victory and a reminder to the people who is clearly guaranteeing their efforts.

Hormah is their first victory on the way to promised land, a foreshadowing of how they will conquer the land with God's help later in the book of Joshua. Edom, their ancient cousins, the descendants of Esau, will not allow them through their land so they have to travel around Edom by the Red Sea, a much longer journey. In their impatience, exhaustion, and foolishness, the people romanticize their experience in Egypt and complain not only to Moses but directly to God for the first time. Hindsight is 20/20 only when we admit the truths of the past, but the people are not willing to look honestly at their past experiences. Every other time, they have only expressed their indignation and frustration to Moses, who then intercedes for them, but now they also call out God directly.

Like little children tired from a long walk or unhappy with a toy that is not new anymore, the people throw a temper tantrum. Have you brought us out of Egypt to die? There is nothing to eat or drink. We are sick and tired of manna. Can we get something else? At least when we were back in Egypt, our stomachs were full and our mouths were never dry? What wishful thinking. How many times have you looked back on the past with such wishful thinking, wondering how the present could be so much worse than back then? Like the Israelites, are you sure that you are remembering back then as it really was? The Egypt that they are talking about was not filled with food and water. It was filled with slavery and hunger and unending labor and exhaustion and impunity and injustice and thirst, so much thirst, as the people worked the Egyptian fields and built Egyptian cities. We must not rewrite our histories, leaving out the difficulties and ignorance of our past, acting as though the present is not filled with the presence and blessing of God. Who we are today and how we see the world must be explained in light of what really happened in the past, not what we choose to remember from our past.

God responds to the people's complaints by giving them what they have asked for. God sends venomous snakes into the camp who bite and cause the people great suffering and death. Through his divine action, God seems to be telling the Israelites, "If you think life in Egypt is so good, then I will give you life under Pharaoh, that serpent, but it will not be as you describe, but as it actually was, filled with fiery pain as your body broke under the unending days of work and the suffering of slavery. Do you remember that? Do you remember what it was really like? Would you really prefer life under the power of the serpent rather than life under the power and steadfast love of your covenant God, YHWH?" The people very obviously do not want to continue to contend with these snakes, so they interestingly come to Moses to make their plea, not God this time. They realize that they are in the wrong, that they have sinned against God and Moses, so they repent and ask Moses to plead with God to remove the snakes.

Moses then asks God how he will respond to the people. God does not just take care of the problem by driving the snakes out of the camp, nor does God leave the snakes to continue killing people. God provides a path to healing, but it is a path that holds the people accountable. The people must not only realize their ignorance and arrogance. They must also do some of the work toward their own healing. Like an addict who enters rehab or joins an AA meeting, the people must respond to God's provision of healing as strange as that provision might appear. God tells Moses to mold an image of a venomous snake or fiery serpent and place it on a stake or pole so that people can see it. If only the people who have been bitten will turn and look at this serpent, then God will heal them. God has always been greater than the power of the serpent, Egypt as they saw 40 years earlier with the plagues. God has always been greater than the power of the snakes' venom. And God has always been greater than the power of the false narratives or stories that the Israelites have been telling themselves since they had left Egypt.

But God is not going to only tell the people that they are wrong and punish them. God makes the people face what they have done, looking up not only to the symbol of their suffering and death but to the God who is more powerful. The people must realize that they are powerless, like young children, in the wilderness. They are fully dependent on God, and God has provided, no matter the story that they tell themselves. And only when the people face their brokenness and pride, their poisoned and corrupted spiritual state, will they be able to repent and confess their arrogance and waywardness. Finally, we do not hear specifically of who does or does not look at the serpent on the pole, which raises the possibility that some did not look because of their own spiritual arrogance, thinking that God is unfair and ridiculous. How many of us act similarly as if we have our lives in order and we only need God for a few things until we find out that our own false memories and pride have blinded us to our brokenness and frailty?

As I said earlier though, this story marks a turning point for the Israelites. Most of the older generation is gone by this time, and the younger generation is showing their willingness to follow God's leading. It took forty years to get this far. Our collective journey and individual journeys are marathons, not sprints. God calls us to continuous deep reflection and repentance, which lead to deep healing. So then, two important characteristics of a community committed to deep relationship and deep healing are honesty and humility. We must be honest with ourselves, our neighbors, and with God. The people of Israel were not able to look honestly at their past in Egypt, realizing how their journey in the wilderness with God had transformed them. We must be able also to look honestly at our past, how it is shaping our present, and begin working alongside God humbly toward the future that God is leading. If we only romanticize our past, looking back at what we want to remember, we will struggle to follow God into a future that

looks different than our past, which may lead to God reminding us of what the past was really like as he did to the Israelites.

On an alternate note, we look at the story, realizing that when God calls us to deep relationship and commitment, that call is not to an easy or suffering-free. God calls us to the wilderness where suffering will push us to look honestly at ourselves and realize profoundly how God is transforming and healing us. The Israelites might have been thinking that life was going to be easy now that God had formally crafted a covenant between the two of them, but the difficult work that comes with becoming God's community, God's true image-bearers was ahead of them. God calls us to the difficult work of facing our fears, our brokenness, our sins, our arrogance, our pride, our self-righteousness, and our insecurities because we can only begin the difficult work of deep healing when we have seen and named those parts of ourselves that we do not want to come to terms with. Then in the midst of this honest work, we also look up to see Jesus lifted up as the snake was to find that in facing our deepest and darkest selves, we also find a path to healing through the cross, the sacrifice of our broken selves so that we can be healed and raised to new life in Jesus. Deep healing in the wilderness requires deep relationship with God and our deepest commitment to God's deep wisdom way of working in the world.

Let us pray. God of the wilderness, you lead us as a pillar of cloud and fire, a reminder of how you led the people of Israel, calling them out of the deceitful way of the serpent, their life in Egypt, into the deep and true way of covenant with you. Your call for them and for us was a call to deep relationship, deep commitment, deep wisdom, and deep healing. You do not long to see us continue to struggle and argue and fight and manipulate and deceive and hide our true selves from you or our neighbors. Empower us with your spirit to be honest, humble, and forthright as we journey together following you in the way of Jesus. In Jesus's name we all pray, Amen.

Benediction:

Through the wilderness of our lives, God is calling us to wholeness. Although we may not see this time as possibility, God is already at work. Look to Christ in faith, noticing the many ways his words and eyes and hands and feet bring and have brought healing. Go with the healing light of Christ. Amen.