

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Numbers 21: 4 – 9

Ps. 107: 1 – 3, 17 – 22

Ephesians 2: 1 – 10

John 3: 14 – 21

-----

It's been said that the best way to learn something is to have to teach it. And since many of you are – or have been – teachers and professors, I trust that you have found that to be true. Akin to that in clergy circles is the saying that you work out your own theology, bit by bit, in writing sermons. I think that is fairly accurate as well. Particularly in trying to understand or make sense of the more troublesome parts of Scripture. Today's lesson from the Book of Numbers is one of those passages for me. Especially juxtaposed against the psalm and then used as a reference in that oh-so-familiar Gospel reading from John.

The issue for me is that I don't know what to do with part of the image of God that is portrayed in the reading from Numbers. It doesn't fit my understanding of God as revealed in much of Scripture and most especially through the words and actions of Jesus Christ. How can that loving and merciful God that I *think* I know send fiery serpents among the people of God because they have the audacity to request something to drink and something to eat other than the manna? Granted, the Israelites are being their usual whining and fractious selves, but is God such a tyrant, or is God so petty, as to respond vindictively against them? Doesn't Jesus have something to say about that?

In the Gospel of Matthew, in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus adjures his listeners to trust God and not worry about what they are going to eat or drink [6:31]. A few verses later, Jesus then says, "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him?" The Gospel of Luke records virtually an identical statement. Surely, Jesus knows about this story from the Book of Numbers! If Jesus says that God will give good things to those who ask, then where does the God who looses a bunch of fiery serpents come in?

The Rev. Dr. Delmer L. Chilton asks if perhaps God is sometimes oxymoronic, that is, does God sometimes express truths that are mutually contradictory? Sometimes when we read the Bible, he says, we seem to find evidence of two quite different images of God. In the first, God is harsh, strict, judgmental, a god of law and punishment, a god of revenge and retribution, a god who's making a list and checking it twice to find out who's naughty and nice. In the second image, we find a God who is gentle, loving, forgiving and even indulgent. The second image of God is of a God who loves with abandon, with a prodigal, spendthrift kind of love lavished on God's people.

All of us grow up with some sort of image of God. Sometimes our images come from our experience in Sunday School or church. Sometimes they come from our family of origin. But as we get older, if we think much about it, we begin to realize the oxymoronic nature of these images and stories. We might grow up in a nursery or with the children's Bible story that has a chubby little wooden ark and cute pairs of animals in pastel colors, knowing that Noah and Mrs. Noah and their family are all saved from this calamitous flood. But wait, who created the flood? God. God, who sent this flood to kill everything and everyone not onboard the ark, which is now surrounded with dead, bloated, drowned bodies. It's not a cute story anymore, is it? So we begin to wonder, which God are we really talking about?

Chilton asks, is God *really* like the self-righteous commandant of a military academy, where every jot and tittle of every regulation needs to be followed or risk a demerit and penalty? Or, he asks, is God *really* like everyone's favorite grandmother, with arms open wide for hugs, twinkling eyes, a listening ear and a sympathetic heart, not to mention fresh-baked cookies ready for the eating?

Even in the New Testament, we see this bifurcated image of God. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians that we hear today, verse three says that we "were by nature, children of wrath," that is deserving of punishment. Which would seem to be linked to the judgmental God who would consign all the unrighteous to hell. But in the very next verse, Paul writes, "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which [God] loved us..." This is the sweet, loving God.

And even in our Gospel lesson for today, that contains that verse which is always held up at football games and found on signs on the back roads, there is at once a message of both judgment and wrath alongside the one of love and forgiveness. Those who don't believe, that is, those who love the darkness more than the light, are condemned and will perish.

So, which will it be? Is God more like Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde? Or neither? Or somewhere in between? The puzzle, the contradictions, the oxymoronic images, pervade Scripture, weaving in and out of so many stories, including today's readings. Let's look at the one from Numbers more closely.

- The people of God are in the wilderness, having been delivered from their oppressive slavery in Egypt. Tally one for the loving, merciful God.
- They begin to grow impatient (and not for the first time) and whine. God's ire is raised, and God responds to their ingratitude by sending fiery serpents out among them to kill them. It's one way to stop the complaining. Tally one for the vindictive, punitive God.
- The people repent and ask for forgiveness. God directs Moses to create (apparently in bronze) a replica of the fiery serpent up on a pole so that the people can simply look at it and receive mercy and healing. Tally another one for the loving, merciful God.

In the Gospel, this very peculiar event with the serpent on the pole is what is given to us as a metaphor for what Jesus is about to accomplish for us by being first lifted up on a cross, and then lifted up to resurrected life. Does that mean that Jesus is analogous to the fiery serpent who kills? John writes that God "did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Jesus may not come to *condemn*, but Jesus *does* come to judge and thereby *save* the world. We like the meek and mild Jesus (a.k.a. the loving, merciful God), but we are less comfortable with the Jesus of the hard sayings and the wrath. Jesus frequently points out the world's sinfulness and gets angry about sin. Remember last week's Gospel of overturning the tables of the money changers and disrupting what had become 'business as usual' at the Temple?

Jesus does come into the world as light into the darkness. A light that the darkness cannot quench. A light that is both judgment and grace. Jesus' coming *is* a judgment in the same way that flipping on a light exposes and convicts those who prefer darkness to cover up their evil actions and brokenness.

There is a story about a wise Christian who was asked how God, if God is merciful, can deprive anyone of the kingdom. The Christian responded, "Why do you keep moving your head?" "Because the sun gets in my eyes," was the reply. "Exactly," responded the saint, "God doesn't keep anyone out of

the Kingdom, but there are some who cannot bear the light.” In concert with that story, C. S. Lewis noted “that the doors of hell are locked on the inside.”

All of which still leaves me not sure what to do with the image of a God who would send fiery serpents out among the people of God. It’s important to remember that Scripture is divinely inspired, but it is also a human creation. We see things through the eyes of the Israelites, people who are just learning how God works. People who believe everything that happens is a result of an action by God, rather than things being consequences of their own actions or choices. In a sense, they are very much expressing judgment on themselves and then attributing it to God. I think the psalmist affirms that view, and I think that Jesus very much affirms that view with what he says.

Jesus the Christ is both God’s judgment on us and God’s gift of salvation. Jesus must be lifted up, just as the bronze serpent is lifted up, to heal and restore the people of God. Jesus chooses to die so that we may live. Jesus chooses to die to break the grip of death and sin on our lives. The cross of death is the way of grace and truth and life. The cross of Christ is the cross of both judgment and grace. Yet God is *not* an oxymoron. God is completely and amazingly consistent. Despite putting up with us. God gets angry at our sinfulness because God loves us so much. God can’t stand seeing us wallow in the consequences of our choices and actions. Our brokenness, our fractured relationships with one another, pull us down and pull us away from God and one another. And they even pull us away from our true selves, the children of God, as God has created us to be. God’s hatred of our sinfulness is so great that God, in Jesus Christ, is willing to go to any length to save us from ourselves.

“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God,” writes Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. [1 Cor. 1:18] The cross is a paradox, an oxymoron, a puzzlement, to the Nth degree. But God is not. The cross is the intersection of God’s judgment of us and God’s love for us. +