

**March 11, 2018 – Fourth Sunday in Lent**  
**“But God”**  
**Rev. Dr. Scott Landis**  
**Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:1-21 (The Message)**

There are so many things going on in today's readings, it is nearly impossible to know exactly where to begin. But the readings ARE linked together by a common theme that I invite you to ponder as we explore the biblical stories and hopefully discover how they might apply to our lives today.

Each situation presents a nearly impossible life predicament for the persons involved. There is no apparent way out or resolve – BUT GOD – offers a way where there is no way. Let's look a little more closely at the three scenarios and see if you don't agree.

The first story, from the book Numbers, describes the rebellious Israelites as they traverse the wilderness on their way toward the Promised Land – the land that God had reserved for them – a land flowing with milk and honey – a place to call home following years of enslaved captivity they experienced at the hand of the Egyptians. Moses had been faithful in leading them as God had ordained, but things had not gone as expected.

They were out of food, they were out of water, they had lousy living and sleeping accommodations. In short, this little journey through the wilderness had gone on too long. They were fed up and wanted it to be over. And so they complained - cursing God, “We had it better off back in Egypt. At least there we had a roof over our heads and food in our stomachs.”

Well, that seemed about as much as God wanted to hear as God responded by sending serpents (poisonous snakes) to bite and kill them. One would think that THAT would teach you from complaining against God. And it did cause them to rethink their strategy. Realizing they may have made a error in judgment, they sought forgiveness after which God instructed Moses to fashion a bronze serpent on a staff and to lift it up so if they WERE bitten, all they had to do was look up at the staff and they would live.

In other words, they had made an egregious error in judgment – BUT GOD had provided a way to ensure they would make it to the Promised Land.

The second story is a bit more humorous – even in its translation into English. Nicodemus (a prominent leader of the Jews) makes a clandestine visit to Jesus at night to try and get to the bottom of these new and seemingly heretical teachings he had to offer. He began by flattering Jesus by stating, “We know you've got to be a teacher straight from God. No one could do the things you do if God were not in on it.”

Jesus responded in kind, “Your absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless one is born from above, it's impossible to see what I'm pointing to – to God's kingdom.

An awkward conversation follows resulting in a rather humorous back-and-forth on how one does that. “How can you go back into your mother’s womb in order to be born again when you are all grown up,” Nicodemus asks? “It just doesn’t make sense.”

It wasn’t exactly serpents nipping at his heels, but Nicodemus was beside himself facing a spiritual dilemma. He was a Jewish leader – a scholar of Jewish law and custom, and highly respected, but he recognized in Jesus something that he knew was right and far surpassed anything that he understood or taught. He knew Jesus was the source of the Divine Presence manifest in ways far superior to any spiritual practice he was able to offer and yet he was beside himself not knowing what to do.

BUT GOD - once again offers a way. Jesus explains to Nicodemus that his path was not faulty, but neither was it complete. Instead of relying on all that one could DO to achieve salvation, all he had to do was BELIEVE. Jesus told him, the “things of God” were right in front of Nicodemus. All he had to do was believe. Which brings us to the third story – which is really an extension of the second. But this story is a tad more complicated than the other two.

Jesus continues, “No one has ever gone up into the Presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence – i.e., the Son of Man – He, Jesus.

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so that people could have something to see and believe, so it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up – and everyone who looks upon him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.

Which begs the question, “what about those who don’t?”

It is unclear, but it now appears that the scenario widens a bit to include others as the focus shifts from the apparent judgment of one (Nicodemus) to the judgment of many. And that’s where it gets particularly tricky because we in the progressive expression of faith have a difficult time with this notion of judgment. I doubt we even share a common definition of just what judgment is. How do we deal with the concept of the “judgment of God?” DOES God judge us? (Individually or collectively) If so, what does the judgment entail? Does God punish us for doing wrong? Serpents? Confusion over two right ways of living? And what do we make of this most famous of all verses – oft quoted but seldom fully understood.

God so loved the world  
That he gave his only Son  
That whoever believes in him shall not perish  
But have everlasting life.

Which, once again, begs the question, what about those who don’t? Believe, that is?

I’ve been thinking about this all week – even tried to pry out some new understandings from my bible study group the other day, but I really struggle personally with this whole notion.

Judgment, I believe, is difficult for most of us to understand for two reasons:

1. We do a pretty good job of judging ourselves.
2. We tend to project what we don't like about ourselves onto others. So we can't help ourselves from judging others.

It's a catch-22.

Most of us ARE pretty hard on ourselves. We don't like the way we look. We often don't feel we measure up on so many standards, e.g., intellectually, or spiritually. We don't feel like we contribute enough or spend far more time thinking of things we would like to change about our lives rather than celebrating what we have been given.

The net result of that is – consciously or unconsciously – we tend to project our negative feelings and judgments of ourselves onto others. In fact, psychologists tell us that the thing (or things) we like least about ourselves are the very things we tend to project in our criticism of others. If you don't believe that, just pay attention to your inner voice – your resident judge – as you respond to others – in conversation, at work, walking down the street, even in your own home.

What Jesus is pointing out in this passage – if you read carefully – is not so much about God's judgment of us – but rather how we have allowed ourselves to wallow in our personal darkness of self-loathing and self-defense by criticizing others. It's a vicious cycle in which we can find ourselves spiraling deeper and deeper into despair – BUT GOD – offers us a way out – a way of personal salvation.

God invites us to a point of decision - a time to get real and be honest with ourselves. And that invitation is steeped in love.

God so loved the world – and God so loved you – that God gave his Son – and that through the Son we might see by example the supreme gift of love.

If there is any judgment – we bring it on ourselves. We can opt to live in darkness – the rest of our lives - just as this passage suggests. We can continue in our criticism of self and others in our struggle to get ahead in life. OR we can stop, pause, notice what we are doing and begin anew – as Jesus said, to be born from above as we realize anew that God loves me – God loves the world.

How might my life be different if I began by accepting that most basic truth of Christian faith?

I'm not saying that there is no judgment from God. But it pales in comparison to the number we tend to do on ourselves and to each other. Think about it.

I ask that you take that very seriously today. In our time of silence, I ask that you begin by entering into a time of personal healing. We can do so by saying to yourself over and

over – God loves me and God loves the world. And then ask yourself – how does that change things? My life? My way of living? How I relate to others -all others? My journey during these waning days of Lent and beyond?

Life may seem very difficult to you right now. Things may not appear to be going your way. BUT GOD – I promise you, loves you and wants you to realize that so that you may truly live. Amen.