

Gates Presbyterian Church

*Showing Up*

March 14, 2021

This morning, a troubling story from Exodus recounting God's deadly response to the Israelites' complaints stands in stark contrast to a reading from John's gospel, which includes that most famous of verses, "for 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."

I don't know about you, but I found myself wondering, What are we supposed to do with these competing images of the one God we follow?

And what does this have to do with our Lent of Listening?

Let's start with Moses and those grumpy Israelites. As our story unfolds, they remain in the midst of their wilderness journey. They are apparently past the feeling of relief about escaping slavery and the Egyptians. They have moved on from gratitude for the manna and the quail with which God has blessed them for physical sustenance. It seems they have even forgotten the event that immediately precedes our story in which God granted their request for protection, helping them to defeat a group of Canaanites.

The people of God are enduring this forty-year exodus journey as punishment for earlier complaints but clearly they have not learned their lesson. In fact, they have fallen into a pattern. Today's story is but one in a series in which the Israelites complain, God reacts, and the people repent.

I think we can all relate. How many of us make the same mistakes over and over. Change is hard. Gratitude in the face of challenge is hard. Accepting the answers God gives (or doesn't give) is hard. Giving up grumbling is hard.

So we should not be surprised to find the people of God complaining again. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?" they cry. It's a fair question. Why *has* God saved them only to punish them with a forty-year

wilderness journey filled with challenges and disasters. *Are* they God's chosen people or not?

Maybe Egypt, predictable as it was with its slavery and hunger and oppression, was better because they knew what to expect. Maybe hope for a new life is too hard a burden to carry. It is easier to accept a grinding path they know than to dare to dream of something new and risk disappointment when things do not go as planned.

Perhaps the people are grumbling at *themselves* as much as at God. Did we do the right thing following Moses? He doesn't talk very well – Aaron always has to help him. (And Aaron, by the way, has died a couple of chapters back so there is also *that* to deal with). Certainly, there must have been a lot swirling around in the minds of the Israelites.

And perhaps God has lost God's patience with the people too. God has freed them from Pharaoh, parted the Red Sea, provided food out of nothing, led them by day and by night and made them victorious in battle. How is this not enough?

Of course, we cannot know the mind of God, but whatever the circumstances are from God's perspective, what happens next is rather shocking. God sends poisonous serpents to bite the people and many of them die.

It is only then that the Israelites realize they have spoken against God, breaking the covenant they share with Yhwh. Reconciliation is required and so they ask Moses to speak to God, to plead their case and ask for salvation.

Moses, as you will remember from last week, agreed early on to be the people's intermediary with God. After their experience receiving God's commandments, the people fear coming face to face with God and rely on Moses' intervention to help them communicate with Yhwh. This time is no exception and, as in previous moments, Moses comes back with a plan devised by God and carried out by God's prophet to save the lives of those who are bitten.

Moses forges a bronze serpent and mounts it on a staff. Any time the people are bitten by poisonous snakes, they are to gaze upon this bronzed serpent and receive healing.

The serpent now both harms and heals. The cure for being poisoned is to gaze at the thing that poisoned you.

Or put another way – the cure for suffering is to gaze at the suffering.

Now *here* is something we can sink our teeth into. Think about that. The cure for suffering is to gaze at the suffering.

This Lent of Listening is all about listening to God and to one another, and how better to listen to one another than to gaze upon our neighbors' suffering and to sit with them in that space. To truly see someone else's suffering, to listen deeply to their life and their experiences, is to show up – just as Linda talked about in her minute for witness this morning – to show up in the middle of chaos and suffering and just be present, to listen, as my father in law, Chuck, used to say, with our third ear.

Maybe you know what I mean. Listening with our third ear happens when we simultaneously bring all of ourselves to the interaction while also leaving all of ourselves behind. We stay in the moment, listening with our eyes and our hearts as well as with our ears. We don't think about what we are going to say back. We don't minimize our neighbor's suffering or suggest they should just put their chin up and soldier on. We show up. We keep an open mind. We accept their experience as a deep truth. We gaze at their suffering.

When we truly attempt to walk in another's shoes, we invite our neighbor – the one to whom we are listening – into a new space where they no longer travel the torturous path alone; where they do not suffer without the possibility of comfort; where they are not asked to endure without the presence of someone who can offer

their strength; where they do not encounter discouragement without someone to offer the presence of hope.

We could easily dismiss the complaints of the Israelites – nothing satisfies them – they have free basic food and now they want variety. They have escaped slavery and now they want a settled prosperous life. They have a God who leads them and now they want to lead themselves. After a while, perhaps we stop listening at all, thinking, “well they are just grumblers, they don’t appreciate what they have.”

Perhaps not. But think of it from their perspective. God has promised a land of milk and honey and is now providing neither milk nor honey and telling them to wait. They are annoyed and frustrated.

But they remain in relationship with Yhwh anyway. The people of Israel ask Moses to speak to God. God responds. They get back on track and they move ahead, together, toward the promised land where all will thrive.

This is what happens when we listen to one another in community.

And this can be what happens for us today when we learn to listen deeply to our neighbors, to put ourselves in their shoes and imagine how we would feel, to empathize, to be present and then to work together toward a new wholeness.

It is not always easy, this listening work. But it is absolutely worth doing.

When I was serving as a chaplain at Strong, I had the honor of listening to many who shared the profound stories of their lives with me at moments of great uncertainty or change or grief. Toward the end of my time there, I had a series of conversations with a woman whose breast cancer had returned and who was facing a complete mastectomy.

This patient’s sister, who had also survived breast cancer but whose cancer had so far remained in remission, was unable to hear her pain and confusion or to join her in wrestling with where God fit into the equation or what it meant that she was

losing a part of her body. As so often happens with people we love, the pain of regarding her sister's suffering was just too much for her to bear. As a result, she was treating her sister with a lack of compassion that was causing additional hurt.

This, of course, is why we live in community and why hospitals offer chaplain services. I, with my distance from the family, had the ability to offer this patient what her sister could not.

Over the course of several conversations, I listened as she talked about where God was in this, as she wrestled with her sense that she was not faithful enough, as she wondered aloud what her life meant now that she could not help others but instead needed help herself.

She was honest and brave and full of grief. It was a lot for anyone to process. But as I sat with her, as I listened and looked openly with her at her suffering, a wonderful transformation began to take place, she began to make peace with her new circumstances.

Once my patient was able to look at her suffering in the company of someone else, once she was able to be heard and seen and accepted just as she was, she was also able to find God in that place. Having the courage to give voice in the presence of another to the worst fears she carried, transformed her experience. This patient was very articulate and so she was able to describe for me what this transition from a feeling of being abandoned and punished by God to a feeling of being at peace with God felt like.

It was a profound experience for me too, to sit there with her, witnessing her pain and fears and also her beginning journey toward a new wholeness and restoration of life. She did all the heavy lifting. I just showed up. Sat in that space with her. And was given the gift of sharing her experience, witnessing what it can mean for someone to be heard and recognizing how a simple act of being present can offer healing beyond our comprehension.

My patient reminded me that day how important it is for each of us to have a place to speak and to be truly seen in all our brokenness. Listening with our whole selves is the first step in gazing at the suffering in our world that separates us from God – the serpent bites that wound us so deeply until we can look directly at them and ask God to show us the way back to God’s self.

As we continue our lent of listening and consider what it means to love one another, holding this image in our mind’s eye can help us remember what matters most; it can direct our eyes towards the poisonous snake bites that wound our community and upon which we need to gaze if we desire healing for all.

This experience of active present listening on the one hand, and the vulnerability to point to and name our suffering on the other, is a gift that we give each other, both in the context of individual relationships and in the wider context of our communities.

The give and take of deep, trusting relationship holds that same paradox of Moses staff and Jesus’ cross – suffering and healing standing shoulder to shoulder in the upside down experience of God’s new creation. This showing up and listening offers a gateway to the healing God desires for all God’s children, both in individual relationships and contexts and, as we will see next week, across community divides and brokenness.

When we listen, we invite someone to share their truth with us. When we show up in the chaos of a crisis moment or the dull pain of a chronic brokenness, we signal our willingness to really see, and seek to understand, another. We show in our actions our willingness to recognize and stand before someone else’s suffering – even, and maybe especially, if it is suffering we have in part or in full been responsible for causing.

Out of this sacred exchange can come unexpected blessings – blessings like forgiveness, reconciliation, and deepening relationships. We will likely not encounter easy answers but will instead need to commit to a slow journey together

toward healing and the opportunity to do something profoundly restorative for our communities and for each other. Even if wholeness does not look the way we hoped and healing does not come in the package we had imagined, the fact of our solidarity on the path offers power and presence that transforms suffering and introduces hope.

This conflation of suffering and healing brings us to our gospel reading this morning, where John reminds us of the agony that Jesus endures in his crucifixion and the glorification that comes from this raising up of Jesus on the cross.

Once again gazing upon suffering – the poisonous “serpents” of the crucifixion – transforms and heals us. In God’s ultimate gift of God’s very self in sacrifice to the brokenness of our world, we find reflected not only the deep suffering of our common humanity but also the great hope of the resurrection and the restoration and salvation which it represents.

This story appears at the end of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, a Jewish leader who asks Jesus about rebirth, trying to understand why everyone, not just the gentiles but the Jews also, must be born from above in order to enter God’s kingdom. Nicodemus just does not get what Jesus is saying to him. So Jesus puts it more clearly.

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

Here, again, stand Moses and the serpents. When Jesus talks about the Son of Man being lifted up like Moses’ serpent in the wilderness, the Greek word that John uses has a double meaning – to lift up and also to praise. Jesus’ death as he is lifted up on the cross is also the source of his glorification. The suffering that we gaze upon on the cross is also the source of our healing.

What Jesus is trying to explain to Nicodemus is that this rebirth is a process, not a one-time event that we can experience, check off the to-do list and move on from. To be reborn, is to experience a complete transformation in how we view the world and our place in it. It is to shift our priorities to reflect those that Jesus taught us, rather than those that the world holds high. It is to be called to gaze at the suffering of our world and to participate in its healing.

As Christ's body in the world, this passage invites us to ask ourselves, when people see us, do they see reflected in us the values and choices that Jesus models or do they see the priorities that the world imposes? Does gazing upon us reveal a healing grace or a painful brokenness? As we gaze upon the suffering of our neighbors, we embody Jesus' work in the world – the work of loving every person no matter what, loving them through the hardest, most broken experiences of their lives and into the healed and restored space of the empty cross. We show up. We bear witness. We stand in solidarity with deep pain.

“But those who do what is true come to the light,” says Jesus, “so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” Our identity as followers of Jesus, as practitioners of holy listening, should compel us toward ‘deeds that have been done in God.’

Indeed, part of how God ‘so loves the world,’ is by sending us out to be God's hands and feet. To listen deeply to the pain and joy our neighbors would share with us. To sit present in those places, to journey with our communities even into the places we might not want to go.

When we dare to look at the world's suffering, we invite the One who suffered for us all into that space too. The power of Jesus' healing presence in the world is undeniable and as individual members of Christ's body, God empowers us to be God's instruments in that healing too.

We start the work one neighbor at a time, one story at a time, one witness at a time. Who is God calling you to listen to today?