

This next Scripture we will be reading will refer us back to the first Scripture that we read this morning. We will see a reference to the serpent and Moses story. Then this Scripture we are about to read will guide us into what may be the most famous Scripture in the Bible for Christians.

Read John 3:14-21

The first Scripture we read from Numbers 21:4-9 are words from the wilderness. The wilderness is that place in the biblical story where God's people are led into as a place of transition. Prior to the wilderness, God's people are in slavery.

They cry out for God to deliver them and God hears their cry. God calls for a leader in Moses to lead them out of bondage in Egypt and toward a place called the Promised Land.

In that journey toward the Promised Land we find out that God's people do not like the path that God has chosen for them. The people complain about the lack of food, so God provides them manna. The people complain about being thirsty, so God provides them water. The people complain about the lack of meat, so God provides them quail.

Throughout the journey in the wilderness we hear complaints from the "Back to Egypt Committee." These are the ones in the crowd who complain about how life used to be so much better when they were slaves in Egypt.

The people complain that at least they had food and drink back in Egypt. Never mind that they were slaves. Going through the wilderness raises the voices of those who wish they could go back to a life of enslavement.

But enslavement is not the life that God intends for God's people. God's intention is freedom. The scripture we read from Numbers is the final time that the people are recorded as complaining in the wilderness.

The people speak against God and ask why God has brought them up out of slavery and into the wilderness. They complain that there is no food and no water, and they detest the miserable food that they do have to eat. The people are showing once again their lack of trust in God.

God responds to their complaints against God and lack of trust in a way that may make us quite uncomfortable. The Scripture says that God sends poisonous serpents their way that bite the people and causes many to die.

But God's actions cause the people to reassess their life. The people seek out Moses and confess their lack of trust in God. Moses prays on behalf of the people. God then directs Moses to take the very thing that has caused them pain, the serpents, and to use it as the source of their healing.

Moses listens to God and makes a bronze statue with a serpent wrapped around a pole. When the people look at this statue they are told that they will be healed.

So, let's focus on what God does here. God uses the source of their pain to invite the people into healing. God uses the source of their pain to invite them into healing. Does God still do this today?

Last week I attended the Next Church Conference in Baltimore, MD. I attended after being invited to do a workshop presentation on how a slave cemetery helped a white's only congregation become integrated. I shared the story of the Clay Hill Graveyard in the woods here.

I showed pictures of the cemetery and told the stories of Elias Hill, and Dorcas Hill, and June Moore, and Solomon Hill. I showed pictures of Liberia and our work in redeveloping the property into Common Ground.

I listened as participants shared with me stories of wilderness from their congregations. I listened as a member of Caldwell Presbyterian Church in Charlotte shared their story. Caldwell Presbyterian Church is where the 24/7 prayer room is located that provided the inspiration for our prayer room upstairs.

I heard the member of that church share their story that their congregation was begun by money that was stolen from African-Americans. Early church leaders stole this money and used it to build their original church buildings. This historical discovery has led them into a spiritual wilderness.

In my workshop I encouraged them to be honest about their history and not to try to pretend that their history is something that it is not. To be honest with the skeletons in their closets. Secrets are not good when looking at one's history. I shared that by being honest with our history here at Allison Creek that God is using our history which includes oppression to bring about transformation today.

The theme of the conference in Baltimore was "Blooming in the Desert." The conference invited participants to be open to the ways that God uses wilderness experiences to bring about hope and new life. Wilderness is an important part of our faith journeys. It is in the wilderness where we can learn to trust God's transformation.

I left to attend the conference in Baltimore at a time when my wife Kathryn and I had to come to terms with our own family brokenness. Our family system is broken. Because of our broken family system Kathryn and I made the very difficult decision to enroll our 17-year-old son James in a wilderness camp.

We enrolled him last week at the camp because of our theological understanding that the wilderness is a place where one grows deeper in understanding.

But ultimately this decision was based on the realization that our family system is broken and that we needed to enter the wilderness together. For my wife and I this involves therapy and other responsibilities that we are undertaking to be better parents to our son.

For our son, living in the wilderness of the North Georgia mountains for these 2 months provides him an opportunity to thrive in an environment that will allow him to discover more about what makes him so special and unique. His current context was preventing him from seeing this.

So, this is the wilderness where my family finds itself right now. But if we believe the biblical story then the wilderness is not a place to run from. Unfortunately, though, our culture teaches us to hide from the wilderness.

We try to hide from the wilderness through the consumption of alcohol or drugs, through avoidance found in addiction to technology, through promiscuous relationships, or by simply wishing it all away.

Various events out of our control throw us into the wilderness. Wilderness can come about through divorce. Wilderness can come about through the tragic death of a loved one. Wilderness can come about by a job loss or relocation.

Wilderness can come about through mental or physical illness or injury. Wilderness can come about through a national tragedy like the destruction of the twin towers. Sometimes wilderness can come about through success that overwhelms us.

But we learn from the Scriptures that we read that the source of our pain may be the location where we need to go to experience healing. In the biblical story, the serpent that caused death became the tool to bring about healing and life. Properly used, our sources of pain can be our places of healing.

For congregations, that means we are honest with our histories and we find ways to offer forgiveness and reorient. For families, it means confronting the dark secrets or brokenness in our closet and finding ways to forgive and reorient. For national tragedies, it means admitting the pain that the events have caused us and finding ways to forgive and reorient.

How does God deal with suffering and tragedy and bring about healing and transformation? According to the second text we read, God responds to pain and suffering this way.

Read John 3:16-17

Wilderness is not something to be feared or avoided. If we enter into the wilderness, we may find a place of healing. AMEN.

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-Given: March 11, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)