

"Break Time"

Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21
4th Lent – 11 March 2018

Numbers 21:4-9

21:4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 21:5 The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." 21:6 Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 21:7 The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. 21:8 And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." 21:9 So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins {2} in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. {3} All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. {4} But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us {5} even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved-- {6} and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, {7} so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. {8} For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- {9} not the result of works, so that no one may boast. {10} For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. 3

John 3:14-21

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, {15} that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. {16} "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. {17} "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. {18} Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. {19} And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. {20} For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. {21} But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Ah, take a deep breath. (breather) We have reached the mid lent break in our journey to the cross. We are ready for a break. Our passages for today 'lighten up' slightly to remind us why we are on the journey anyway. This Sunday in Lent, which corresponds to JOY Sunday in Advent, and happens to be led by JOY today, affords us opportunity to give further consideration to who we are, but to do so in light of what we know about Christ in whom we believe. The Christ of love. The Jesus, *who so loved the world*.

Today we get a break. But it's a Lenten break. Kind of like a Spring break vacation. You know the wonderful exhausting fun that makes your feet hurt and gives you a sunburn and makes you want to trade your kids in for new ones and leaves your wallet considerably lighter that seems to last a month leaving us in need of vacation from our vacation. The kind of break that helps us to appreciate all of the rest of our days that aren't quite so 'exciting.' Lent's a lot like that. It helps us to look forward to what's next. Today is supposed to be a 'reminder' Sunday along the way to the cross. Today we blend the purple penitence of Lent with the brilliant white of Easter for some shade of pink.

So why are we reading about snakes in the campsite and then this part of the Ephesians letter when Paul says, "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient." Yeah, that sounds a lot like Paul is cutting us some slack. Not so

fast. Read on. Paul, in his own way, to tell us about what it is that God's love can do for us. Before we get to the good stuff, he describes the state of our living. That state in which all of the ills of our lives take root and flourish and that is, of course, the state of sin. You remember sin. We used to talk about it a lot. Now we prefer human frailty, foibles or failures. Paul knows you can call it whatever you want to, but it's sin. And sin, now as always, is a pervasive force in the world.

It is human sinfulness that makes us doubt our ability to love. It is human sinfulness that tempts us to fail. It is human sinfulness gone awry that creates an environment in which evil and disease thrive. It is human sinfulness that sows the seeds of human conflict and aggression which lead to war. It is human sinfulness that creates the arrogance it takes to believe that "I or we" is somehow better than "you or they." It is prideful human sinfulness that allows us to suppose that we are the center of the universe. It is human sinfulness that makes us doubt our ability to love enough to do what is right and good. Paul knows that we are powerless when it comes to sin and all of the ills caused by that sin. That is what the whole discussion is about in Ephesians. Sounds pretty preachy when we're trying to catch a break. Sounds a little like go stand in the corner for some time out.

OK. Fair enough. Just be patient. Paul talks about being in a state, in an environment of sinfulness. How we're lost to our sin. Then he offers us a break.

He uses two vitally important words as he says, "But God. . ."

But, is a game changer. We can be heading in one direction, and along comes 'but...' and we go in another. We can be going through life and all seems either good or bad, and **but** changes everything. We were camping on our imaginary spring break and decided to take a hike. Within a few minutes we feel lost. In an hour we know we're lost and begin to panic. In two hours we're getting desperate. **But** about that time a park ranger looking like Dudley DOright steps out of the woods and says, 'go that way' and we were saved." Paul says "We're lost in sin, **But** God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved--. . . For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

Here in mid-lent as we take a break from berating ourselves because of what we do and fail to do, the word comes to us -- *but* God -- *but* 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. "Indeed , 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 came to give us a break. To do for us what we can not do and to do

it in amazing, sacrificial love.

Just how much can love do? How big a break can love afford us? If love can remove from us our sin and the death that we deserve in that sin -- just how much can that love of God in us do? If love is willing to send God's only son -- if God so loves us as to sacrifice God's only begotten son -- just how much can that love of God in us do?

We alone have no such capacity – BUT God so loved us that --

-- we can love, nurture and raise our children in the faith

-- we can commit to our own love in imitation of God's love for us and pledge and promise to love always ... even when human love sometimes fails us.

-- we can take the worst news the world has to offer us and we can pull together in prayer and praise and we can trust and hope and we can in faith accept God's will

-- we can love the unlovely, the unlovable, the one who would resist and humiliate and disdain our love, and we can care and use that love as a shield for what we must take and as a battering ram against that which occupies the mind and heart of ones who need our love more desperately than we need theirs

-- we can love those who have lost capacity, mentally or physically, to love us, knowing that sometimes that loves calls on us to make difficult decisions on behalf of the one loved

-- we can love others who are so vastly different from us in politics and religion that we are frightened of them because Christ loves us even when in our prejudice, greed, bigotry and warring mentality are so vastly different from Christ himself.

Just how much can love do? If love, God's love can defeat evil, sin and death -- what is there that love cannot do? And that love is at work in us to live for and to do God's will.

In Lent, and especially in times of such great animosity, fear and distrust, in a world lost to sinfulness we could be lost -- but God has in Christ defeated the power of sin and death. We are not bound to these things. In Christ we can be free.

If God can conquer sin and death in the power of that sacrificial love, then God can so love us as to save the whole world. God can lift us up. God's love can raise us above the poisonous fury that lies beneath our nature. God's love can raise us up above the constraints of our own failures and limitations. God's love can lift us up out of our fears and anxiety to live in joy and peace.

But, and this is a very important **but**, in Lent we must ask ourselves if we are willing to allow God's love to work in us, not only and amazingly to affect our salvation, but to be and do what God wants us to be. But because we are saved by the grace of an all powerful, all loving God, we can do things that are loving and powerful.

We can love each other, we can overcome those sinful aspects of our selves that would keep us separate, we can overcome greed with love, and prejudice with love, and hate with love, and dissension with love, and slander with love, even the evil of war with love ... with the love of God in us we can be the people God wants us to be.

There are only a couple of more weeks in Lent. But for today, let us think about that all powerful, ever present, uplifting love of God -- in us. Its Mid-lent, but the real break comes in a few weeks. It's after lent. It's after the journey. It's called Easter. For God so loved the worldand Jesus came to give us the break.