



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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MARCH 15, 2015
THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT
BE THOU MY VISION

Open Our Eyes to Real Needs
Numbers 21:4-9; John 6:1-14

Have you ever considered that God might be unpredictable and even dangerous? Most of us tend to think of God as the grandfatherly type, certainly powerful, but restrained, far more eager to dole out treats than punishment, ready to step in and help rather than stand by and watch while we blow and twist in the wind. As Isaiah reminds us, however, “my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways,” says the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8), a lesson the Hebrew people learned time and time again.

Our Old Testament lesson this morning is a head-scratching example of God’s sometimes unpredictable way of dealing with us. It sounds more magical than theological and more punitive than redemptive, but then we are often a lot like the Hebrews who experienced the story, aren’t we?

To recap the story we heard earlier from the Book of Numbers, Israel was in the desert making its way from Egypt to Canaan, from slavery to freedom in the Promised Land. They had visited the sacred mountain where God offered them the Ten Commandments despite their dalliance with the golden calf. Aaron, who was responsible for that particular transgression, died and was mourned by Israel for thirty days, far longer than the traditional week-long period of mourning. They resumed their journey, skirting around Edom on their way to Canaan.

The people were tired and cranky. It is no easy task to move 600,000 people (Moses’ estimate) through the desert. Earlier they had complained about a lack of food and God responded first with manna and then with quail. Once again the people complained not because they had no food, but because the food was so bad. I suppose any of us would get tired of the same menu day after day. The Hebrews wanted fresh vegetables and seasonings such as they had enjoyed in Egypt. So they complained and pitched a fit and generally showed themselves to God.

They camped and serpents swarmed among them. Poisonous serpents with a fiery bite inflicted death on many of the Hebrews. They went to Moses and begged him to intercede with God. They confessed their bad behavior

and appealed to God to get rid of the snakes. Here is where the story gets really interesting.

Professor Cameron Howard reminds us to look for what we ordinarily do not see in the text. She points out that we, like the Hebrews, assume that God sent the serpents as punishment for their bad behavior; yet, the text does not tell us so. It does tell us that the people complained, but complaint in and of itself is not a sin. In fact, there is a rich tradition in the Jewish religion of telling God what you do not like, even of arguing with God. Think of Abraham's bargaining session with God over the fate of Sodom. Remember Tevye's constant complaining to God in *The Fiddler on the Roof*. The people complained about the food. Period. Then, God sent snakes. We do not know why. There is not a direct cause and effect connection between the two actions. Nevertheless, the people concluded that God sent the snakes to punish them and they appealed to Moses for help. There is no clear indication of why the snakes appeared.¹

The people begged Moses to ask God to get rid of the snakes, but that is not what they needed nor what God did. God had Moses create a bronze serpent and place it on a pole so that anyone who was bit by a snake could look at it and be healed. Even if these snakes left the camp, others would appear along their journey. Rather than a one-time fix, the people needed a permanent cure, and that is what God provided. One could argue that God's gift to the Hebrew people continues to be effective today. Some of you have already made the connection between this serpent on a pole and the image of the Caduceus, the symbol of the health profession. Snakes still slither upon the earth, but God provides for our care through the medical community.

This story is but one example of God's unpredictable nature. Let us see what the New Testament has to offer to this understanding of God?

As we have seen, food figures prominently in many stories throughout scripture. One of the most familiar stories is the feeding of the five thousand, the only miracle that is told in all four Gospels. John, however, gives it a different twist. Listen:

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee,
also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him,

¹Cameron B.R. Howard, "Commentary on Numbers 21:4-9," *Working Preacher* (March 15, 2015); available online at: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2393.

because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." John 6:1-14

Jesus and his disciples had escaped the villages along the seashore to be alone in the hills but the crowds followed them. Jesus saw the throngs coming and perhaps also noticed the distressed expressions on the faces of his disciples. I wonder if he was trying to have a little fun with them when he asked Philip, "Where will we buy food for them to eat?" A little shocked, Philip answered that six months wages would not pay the catering fee for that crowd. Keep in mind that none of them, including Jesus, was working for pay at the time. I wonder if Andrew picked up on Jesus' mood and said jokingly, "Here is a boy with five loaves and two fish!" They might have all had a good chuckle until that hoard of people filled the hillside all around them.

All that the disciples could see was a mass of humanity that would need to eat at some point, but notice that no one else brings up the issue. No one in the crowd asks where the food court is. No faint-looking representatives are sent to demand Jesus provide supper for them all. It is Jesus who raises the issue and the disciples who make it one. Jesus, however, discovers another teachable moment. He has the disciples instruct everyone to be seated. He offers thanksgiving to God, and passes the food among the

people. Everyone is fed with enough leftovers to fill twelve baskets. People were awed at Jesus.

In the story of the serpents and the story of the feeding of the crowd, God directs us to see something that is not so obvious. God urges us to look at the true needs of the people involved. The Hebrews did not need a St. Patrick to charm the snakes away from their camp. They needed protection for the times when someone would be bitten and require a cure. The crowd gathered on the mountain to hear Jesus did not need a catered feast. Likely many of them had brought food and the generosity of the boy with the loaves and fish inspired them to share their food with one another—a miracle in anyone’s book for it manifested the presence of God. The need of the people, however, was to hear Jesus. They needed to learn from him and many desired to be healed by him. Food was likely the least of their concerns, but the nurture of their spirits was what they desperately sought.

Sometimes our perception of needs is incorrect. Sometimes we think people need what we want them to have. When our friends from South Africa were here a few weeks ago, Rev. Sikawu Makubalo told a story in Sunday School that will not leave me alone. He reported that some time in the past year a group of people had been protesting the lack of government response in rural areas. During the protest, a temporary school housed in a mobile unit similar to what we use in our school system, was vandalized. Great damage was done so that the building was unusable. Churches in the area rushed to repair and refurbish the school so that the children would have somewhere to learn. Within a few weeks, however, the school was vandalized again by the protesters.

Sikawu and other church leaders met with the protesters and asked why they had destroyed the building a second time. “We want a nice, permanent school,” they responded. The church leaders agreed but said that in the meantime a temporary school was better than nothing at all. “You don’t understand,” the protesters insisted. “For five years the government has promised us a new school but all we have is a temporary one. Three miles away, there is a nice, permanent school for other children. As long as we have a temporary building, the government will keep delaying and we will never get anything better.”

What the pastors in that area learned is that the first thing they should have done was to ask the people of the village what they needed. Instead, they gave the people what they, the religious leaders, wanted them to have.

They were being just as insensitive as the government when it came to providing help that was truly needed.

When we want to help, when we desire to make a difference in the lives of people around us, we need first to find out what it is that the people involved really need. We need to look and listen and feel the true needs of the people we want to help. It is doubtful snakes will ever be eradicated from the earth, but a cure will always be needed for a snakebite. People will get hungry, but hunger may be their least need when they are hurting in other ways. We may want to go in one direction with our ministry because it seems so obvious and right, but God may want to lead us in a different direction because that is where we will find the need we can best meet.

A friend told me the other day that when he worked on the campus of a Christian care ministry, once a year the director would invite someone to visit who had never before been there. The purpose of the visit was not to enlist them to work or even to make a donation. Their task was to walk all over the campus, through every building, and make notes about what they saw, especially where repairs or improvements needed to be made. He invited a stranger because, as we all know, when we are familiar with a place, we tend to ignore the smudges on the wall or the raised brick in the sidewalk. We do not pay as much attention to fading paint or dirty windows. Fresh eyes notice such things.

God encourages us to use fresh eyes to discover the needs around us and the needs within us. As we think about God's vision for us as a congregation, we need to look at our church and our community from different angles. We need to ask different questions, think about alternate ideas, approach our needs from all angles in order to discover where God is leading us next. Our needs and the needs of the community may not be so obvious. We may need to ask first and respond later. We may need to pray first and then follow God to the places we are needed. We may need to take a long look before we see the obvious needs that we all have been missing. What do we need? What does our community need? What does God want us to see?

It is a great temptation to provide a quick fix or a nutritious meal for a need that presents itself to us. It is our nature to do so. God, however, is not as predictable as we are. God calls us to look, to listen, to feel, to discern the real needs of our community, of our church, of ourselves. As we look, may God be our vision for new insights into faith and ministry. Amen.

March 15, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God of creation and renewal, of power and vulnerability, in your infinite wisdom and love, you fashioned us from the dust of the earth and revealed yourself in the substance of our own flesh. You invite us into conversation and accompany us on our journey of life and faith. You call us to examine our words and actions in light of the life and ministry of Christ and, by your grace, enable us to be transformed into his likeness. You guide us safely through the wilderness and, even when we grumble with discontentment, you provide for our needs. For your protection over us and your presence with us; for your truths that challenge us and your grace that accepts us; for the gift of brothers and sisters who are companions on this journey and your call to befriend the stranger; for every good gift which comes from your generous hand, we offer to you all that we have and all that we are and lift our hearts in gratitude and praise.

But we confess, O God, that it is easy to be open to you when the news is good and our faith is strong. It is easy to entrust our lives to you when answers come and your work among us is apparent. So we ask for the faith to seek you when we feel alone or defeated, when the needs are great and the resources are few, when your call to serve stirs our hearts with compassion but our energy is depleted and our perseverance is waning. Where there is suffering, help us to bring comfort. Where there is need, move us to respond generously. Where there is violence, teach us to be messengers of your peace. Where there is loneliness, enable us to be present. Where the shadows of doubt and hopelessness seem to reign, give us enough light to illumine our own path and to dispel the darkness for another. In every circumstance of our lives, in every opportunity that is before us, grant us vision to see your image in each person we encounter, to respond to the needs around us with your heart of compassion and possibility, and to recognize the life-giving work of your Spirit not only in our own lives but especially in the small and meek and vulnerable, knowing that your kingdom belongs to such as these. In the name of the Christ who met our deepest need by demonstrating the fullness of God's grace and who showed us how to love by first loving us, we offer these and all our prayers. Amen.

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