

Lent 4b 2021
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Numbers 21:4-9 Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 Ephesians 2:1-10 John 3:14-21

In the ancient Roman church, today's worship began with the word "Rejoice!" In some traditions, the day is one of recognition of the "new Jerusalem" of Isaiah 66:

"Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her; that you may suck and be satisfied with her consoling breasts; that you may drink deeply with delight from the abundance of her glory." (Isaiah 66:10-11)

This passage is an expression of deep hope to a people in desperate need of such hope. Although the Israelites had been released from slavery, they were deep in the wilderness toward a land they did not know; for two generations they journeyed through desolate lands. Today we give ourselves a day of respite from our Lenten journeys; tomorrow we plunge into "deep Lent," the final two weeks of our pilgrimage to Jesus' cross. We can almost see resurrection, but we are not there yet. Rejoice Sunday is also called "mothering" Sunday because of the imagery of the New Jerusalem as a mother – a mother who provides abundantly for her children.

In the desert, God provides the Israelites with sustenance in the form of an unusual food called manna. God sustains God's beloved people day after day, year after year, decade after decade. Our response to God through all of our journeys is shockingly familiar ...

"We have no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food!" We open the refrigerator or the cupboard, both filled with edible items, shut the door and grumble: "there's nothing in this house to eat!"

Here is the pattern of desert life: the people grumble, Moses talks to God, and God sends help, and most often not in the way we expect. This odd little passage about snakes biting and then a particular one being lifted up might be helpful only in the sense that our Lord was also lifted up to save God's beloved people.

The author C.S. Lewis brings this ancient story into New Testament relevance: "God, who needs nothing, loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures in order that he may love and perfect them." And when we superfluous, sinful creatures continue to turn away from God, God sends Jesus to save us.

We hear the most oft-quoted bible passage, John chapter 3 verse 16: For God so loved that world that he gave his only Son, that all who believe in him will not perish but have everlasting life.

Remember: we are superfluous and God chose us – you, and me, too! to be Jesus' hands and feet right now, on this earth. In that way, we are part of God's ongoing creation and the vessels of

God's love. We work on having a true and strong relationship with Jesus so that we may know God in the best way that we (humanly) can. We still grumble – and we still need God. The pattern of our ancestors is still a valid rhythm:

We sin, mess up, turn away from God, knowingly or unknowingly. We grumble when everything that we need is in front of us.

We, not Moses, talk to God. We call that prayer. We work to reconcile with those we have harmed, knowing that sometimes we have harmed others, ourselves, or, as a Eucharistic prayer reminds us, “our fragile island home.”

God still provides, continues to save the community of humankind. God delights in our efforts to turn back to God.

In the next two weeks, turn intentionally to God; pray, talk, and listen. Listen again. This is the work of deep Lent. We all have a desert journey – times of loss, fear, and wandering in unknown places. 2020 comes to mind, although we have many times of wandering and turning away, of being hurt, being hungry for God's unfailing love.

God so loved the world,

¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

God loved the world; the work of deep Lent, although an individual journey, is also and fundamentally a corporate journey.

Our relationship with God is not cheap. It is not easy. And we are not saved because we are good – or because I am good and you are not – or that you are good and I am not. We are saved because we are part of God's beautiful creation that adores and redeems, over and over again, through the ages – past, present and future.

Today, rejoice well. Celebrate our abundance. Recharge.

Tomorrow walk confidently into deep Lent. Know that you are not alone in the work of fasting, almsgiving, and prayer. Your community, past and present is with you. God is with you/us.

Fast from enough, turn over enough,

Give away enough

Throw out enough – turn over enough

Pray enough

To make room for the love of God through Christ Jesus.

Lift up your eyes and hearts to cross of God's victory. At the end of Lent, we will have just begun.