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Idol Hands  
Wesley Mimico United Church  
March 15, 2015  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-21

Today, we are invited to keep on our journey towards Easter. That journey we call Lent. And the authors of the lectionary chose to connect the journey of Lent to the story of the journey of the exodus, which is why we read about the people wandering in the wilderness today. A very short summary of the exodus story is that the Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt, and God liberated the people. The people - who were then renamed, "Israelites" left Egypt and journeyed to the land we call Palestine, under the belief that God wanted them to live there.

In today's passage, the people are still on the "journey" part of the adventure. And they are not having a good time. They don't like the food or the lack of water. In the Bible it says that the journey lasted 40 years. Depending on where we think the end points of the journey might have been, the people would have covered about 500 km. That would be an average speed of 34 metres per day. If you walked 8 hours per day, that would work out to stopping because someone says, "wait, I need to go to the bathroom" 239 time every day. It's not hard to imagine people reacting poorly to a journey like that.

For me - that part of the story is not strange at all. It is not strange that living as a tourist - living out of a suitcase - wears thin after awhile. It is not strange that we feel upset when we can't get the food and drink that we are used to. When we can't find our "comfort food". And the people's response to their deprivation isn't all that strange either - they complain. Is that strange? Do you know anyone who is a bit cranky if they don't get their morning coffee?

But the story continues. The complaining is only the first part. In the second part, as we read, God sends poisonous serpents to kill the people because they are complaining too much. And the people repent, and so does God. It's a bizarre story. Most of us know how to handle whiners and complainers, but in this story, the only

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solution God can imagine is murder.

But now it gets a bit strange. God does not get rid of the serpents. God does not prevent the serpents from biting the people. God does not even prevent the poison from making the people sick. Instead, God asks Moses to create a bronze serpent to put on a stick, so that sick people can look up at the bronze serpent and be cured.

But really - what kind of solution is that? If God made the serpents appear, why would God not simply get rid of them? And if the people are sick of Moses, why don't they just pick their own direction and head out? How did the serpents just appear? Had the people walked into a region that simply had a lot of serpents? And more fundamentally, why can't God deal with the complainers in more constructive ways?

Of course, if we take this story as historical, all sort of questions like that will probably keep us up nights. Perhaps we need to read the story in some other way to allow any underlying truths to surface. And this is not only my opinion. Many scholars believe that the exodus story is not a description of actual historical events, and that it's best teachings will come from reading the story in other ways. Professor Ze'ev Herzog, of the Archaeology Faculty at the University of Tel Aviv in Israel puts it this way: "Following 70 years of intensive excavations in the Land of Israel, archaeologists have found out: The patriarchs' acts are legendary stories, we [the Jewish people] did not sojourn in Egypt or make an exodus, and we did not conquer the land. Neither is there any mention of the empire of David and Solomon [outside the Old Testament]. Those who take an interest have known these facts for years, but Israel is a stubborn people and doesn't want to hear about it."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps we too are a stubborn people and don't want to make the effort it might take to read the whole exodus story differently.

Besides, as with most really old stories, if the stories are historically true, the stories do not really involve us because we were not there. But if the stories are mythical and fictional, then we are invited to find the truth of the story for ourselves today. And in *that* truth, we are involved and we have the potential to be effected. If we find truth in

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ashraf62.wordpress.com/2012/03/17/in-ancient-egypt-canaan-revisited-without-israel/>

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the story for today, then we have the potential to be transformed ourselves.

In any case, the story of the serpents is not quite over. We heard how and why the bronze serpent was created. The Bible speaks of the destruction of the bronze serpent too. In 2 Kings the Bible speaks of a later time, when Israel is established as a kingdom. And the new king, Hezekiah, is making a few changes. In Chapter 18 it says, “King Hezekiah removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan.”

So that’s the life cycle for the bronze serpent. The bronze serpent was created so that the people could look up to it and live, but over time people started to worship the bronze serpent itself. The bronze serpent became an object to which offerings were made. Over time, the bronze serpent became an idol for the people. And so, Hezekiah had it destroyed. The bronze serpent was once an tool of salvation, but it came to be seen as an object of idolatry, and then it was destroyed.

In 2012, when Greg Smith resigned from Goldman Sachs, the world was shocked by the passion that Smith - a finance geek - held. I quote from his letter, “It might sound surprising to a skeptical public, but culture was always a vital part of Goldman Sachs’s success. It revolved around teamwork, integrity, a spirit of humility, and always doing right by our clients. The culture was the secret sauce that made this place great and allowed us to earn our clients’ trust for 143 years. It wasn’t just about making money; this alone will not sustain a firm for so long. It had something to do with pride and belief in the organization. I am sad to say that I look around today and see virtually no trace of the culture that made me love working for this firm for many years. I no longer have the pride, or the belief.”<sup>2</sup> Smith says of the current situation, “To put the problem in the simplest terms, the interests of the client continue to be sidelined in the way the firm operates and thinks about making money.”

So, Goldman Sachs started as a financial institution that sought long-term success

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2115149/Greg-Smith-Goldman-Sachs-executive-walks-saying-toxic-bank-morally-bankrupt.html>

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through helping it's clients. And in the process, they made a lot of money. But today - at least according to Greg Smith - making money has become the principle objective. Making money is now the goal. Making money - something that used to be a vehicle to help other people, has come to be seen as an idol itself.

And perhaps the gospel story is about a different idol. The reading started with John 3:16. That's the verse number that is often written on large pieces of cardboard and displayed to television cameras at sporting events. As if the entire Christian experience could be wrapped up with that single verse. The famous verse - The "God so loved that world" verse. I personally like the fact that the verse speaks of love. That it speaks of the love of God. That the verses following it speak of our response to that love.

But the verses also speak of judgment of others. The verse speaks of lack of tolerance to people of other faiths. These verses have been used to justify evil deeds done by Christians to non-Christians over the years.

Of course, we are not called to give up on the central role of Jesus in our own lives. But as we journey through Lent, and as we approach Easter, it is a good chance to consider how to embrace Jesus as a key element of our faith in ways that allow people of other faiths to keep their own faiths too. It is a good chance to remind ourselves of what is important to us in terms of our faith. It is a good chance to push at our own beliefs - and to let those beliefs push back at us. It is a good chance to look for the places in our own lives where a "thing" - a person, a career, our faith, a church building, a family, something - that once brought hope and salvation to us has come to be idolized. And idols must be destroyed. Easter will come soon enough. Lent is a good time to ask tough questions.

God so loved the world. All of it. We can at least embrace that. We can build on that. We can be part of that.

As we continue our lenten journey, let us journey in love.

*Amen.*