
Idol Hands
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
March 14, 2021
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 today 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 Hebrew people wandering in the wilderness today. A very short summary of the exodus narrative is that the Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt, and God liberated the people. The people - who renamed themselves, "Israelites" left Egypt and journeyed to the land called Canaan - modern day Palestine Israel, using the idea 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. I've done the math! 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 proverbial 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, 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 solution "God" can imagine is

murder.

That part of the story is almost rational. But now the mythical story gets a bit strange. Because when the people repent, 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? And more fundamentally, why can't God deal with the complainers in a more constructive way?

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 Jewish scholars believe that the exodus story is not a description of an actual historical event. 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 Hebrew Bible]. 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."¹

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. However if the stories are mythical, 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 the story for today, then we have the potential to be transformed.

In order to put ourselves into the story, I think we need to hear how the story ends first. The story of the serpents is not quite over. We heard how and why the bronze

¹ ashraf62.wordpress.com/2012/03/17/in-ancient-egypt-canaan-revisited-without-israel/

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 has become a kingdom. And the new king, Hezekiah, is doing some house-cleaning. 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 this mythical 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 a tool of salvation, but it came to be seen as an object of idolatry, and then it was destroyed. An object designed to promote healing became an idol. An object designed to promote healing became - over time - a barrier to healing. Great story. But does that sort of thing actually happen in real life? Well, yes!

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 a letter he wrote, “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.”² 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

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

through helping its clients. And in the process, they made a lot of money. But by 2012 - 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. I think it's actually very easy to create something of value that over time becomes an idol.

The gospel story is about another idol. The reading included 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 full reading 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 for many 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. But in ways that allow people of other faiths to keep their own faiths too. And 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.

The authors of the lectionary invite us to compare the journey of Lent with the 40 year journey through the wilderness. Well, that's a popular idea of course. And you have likely heard countless sermons based on that idea. But this year, I think we have a more direct parallel. Yes, we are on the journey called Lent. But we are also on a journey called the Pandemic.

And please don't take this the wrong way. But my observation of many people on the pandemic is that there is a lot of complaining going on. We - like the Hebrew people in the story - are not getting the food that we want. We are not gathering like we want to.

We are not engaging our own community like we want to. We are not eating together like we want to. There are things to complain about, for sure. And what's the cure? Well, I think some people are holding up a golden serpent called "going back to normal". And whenever someone complains, someone - perhaps even me - makes some reference to the idea that we will be going back to normal sometime. In the early days of the pandemic that idea made a lot of sense of course. But our pandemic journey has lasted longer than we expected. No, it won't last 40 years. But remember that the Bible often uses the number "40" to simply indicate "a big number". And our pandemic has gone on for a long time.

I just hope that we - as a community of faith - will not make the phrase "going back to normal" into an idol. Because I believe we can do better than that. I need to share a story.

This week I spent some time with a local resident - near the church building actually. I'll call him "Bob". Bob shared with me various aspects of his life, his struggles, his attempts to get his life back on track. Like most people I meet in these situations, the presenting issue involved money. But in conversation, other needs surface. Issues we can relate to, like isolation, loneliness, and the basic need for friendship. Other needs surface too. Like the need to learn how to cook inexpensive and nutritious meals. The need to understand how to manage money. Help with basic practical things. And the more that Bob talked, the more I realized how much Sydenham-Heritage can do to help people like Bob. Ordinary people that we are.

As we start to imagine emerging from the pandemic, we have a simple choice to make. Are we going to idolize our past and try to get back to that as fast as possible? This is a great opportunity to consider what we have done in the past - things that once brought healing. And if those things still bring healing, then great, let's do them again. But if there is anything about our congregational life that we idolized to the point that it was no longer bringing healing to us, we are invited to let that go.

I hope that as we move through the pandemic, our new sense of "normal" includes responding to the story of Bob and people like Bob. That we reach out to people who need help with things that some of us take for granted. Knowing how to cook decent

food. Knowing how to repair clothing so that it lasts longer. Knowing how to maintain a bicycle. Knowing how to make a budget. Basic needs. Basic caring. Basic friendship. We can do this. And that's my short list. Each of us has abilities and skills that some people in our community would love to learn. We are a great group of people, remember. Think about the gift to the community that this church has been - and can be again. What gift do you have that you want to share with our community, and how can Sydenham-Heritage help you share that gift with our community?

God so loved the world. All of it. We can 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.