

In the name of God, Creator, Incarnate, and Renewing Spirit.

In our lessons this morning, we are listening in on part of the conversation that humankind has had over the millenia about who God is, how God acts in our lives, and how we're supposed to live in response to God's work with us.

We begin with the passage from the book of Numbers; the first thing that comes to mind when I read this is what my scripture professor in seminary would say over and over again: Context is everything. Passages like this one were put together from oral tradition by a group of people who had certain ideas about how God interacted with humankind. They were convinced that anything bad that happened must be punishment for some kind of sin committed, even a sin committed unknowingly. For the writers of the book of Numbers, the adversity faced by Israel as a people just had to be connected to some disobedience, no matter how slight. When the Israelites find themselves far from the familiar, far from what they knew as home, wandering seemingly aimless in the desert with a very unimaginative menu of food on offer, they complain. I think their response is very human, and very understandable. The writers of the Book of Numbers, however,

believe that complaining against the unhappiness they felt was a complaint against God, and therefore a sin; and for the writers of the Book of Numbers, that was the explanation of the Israelites' encounter with venomous snakes out there in the wilderness. You wouldn't have been bitten, they scold, if you hadn't complained! But even through this bad theology, there is a glimpse of God's mercy; God provides a way to healing and a way forward for these poor people wandering in the wilderness. Give them something to focus on, God tells Moses; give them something to center their thoughts and their hearts on that will turn their energy away from the fear of snakes. Give them a light to look up to; then they can see their way forward.

Centuries later, the writer of our Gospel this morning revisits this episode. The writer of John takes up the conversation humankind has been having about who God is, and how we're meant to respond to God working with us, and finds a different way of seeing and understanding how God works in our lives. Instead of a God who keeps track of sins committed and immediately punishes for them, the Gospel writer speaks of a God who visits humankind not to condemn, but to save.

The Gospel of John begins with that wonderful passage that says that light has shined in the darkness, and darkness has not overcome it. In this morning's reading, Jesus is the light that is lifted up before us; Jesus is what we look to, what we center our hearts and thoughts on, what we are meant to focus on in the midst of adversity. Jesus is that light in the darkness that heals and saves us; Jesus is the light lifted up before us calling us to works that are true; calling us to deeds done in God.

And our Epistle writer carries this millenia-long conversation further. The works that are true, the deeds done in God are not to be undertaken as some mechanism by which we can somehow save ourselves. That falls into the legalistic checklist, the kind of transactional behaviour that we touched on last week. The light in which we live, the works that we undertake that are true, our deeds done in God, are our response to God's free gift to us. It is a gift of life, rich with mercy and grace, given out of love. We don't have to earn this grace by doing good works; we don't have to earn this mercy by somehow achieving a state of sinlessness that is humanly impossible. God gifts us with healing; we are called to respond by living our lives according to that divine love.

By grace we have been saved, not by our own doing. God breaks into our lives not to condemn or punish, but to gift us with ways we can fully be alive even in the midst of adversity. God's light shines before us, lifted up so that we can look to it, center ourselves in it, focus our lives on it and be re-created anew.

It is not a sin to bring lament or complaint to God in the midst of sorrow, loss, and uncertainty; in fact, that is part of being in a relationship with God that is transforming and life-giving. But when we find ourselves in that dark place, God calls us to look for the light; it is always there for us to turn to, to live toward, to find rest and meaning in. The God who meets us in that light is a God of compassion, rich in kindness, who will not condemn us in our sorrow and pain, but will heal and save. In the darkness, seek the light lifted up for us; it never dims, never fades, and is never overcome. Amen.