

THE STOCKDALE PARADOX

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Based on Numbers 21:4-9. Stinging Snakes of Fire in the Desert's Last Days

Last Sunday's story from the Scripture started at the edge of the Sinai wilderness, three months in to the journey through the desert. Today's story takes place forty years later. Still in the desert.

We have shifted from last Sunday's joyful holy union with a liberating God and a loving community to decade after decade of hot sun and sparse land, of little water and tasteless bread.

Our lesson today picks up near the end of the wilderness journey. The land is in sight, but there is still a long way to go.

From Numbers 21:4-9*

The Israelites set out from eastern Sinai
to go around the land of Edom;
but along the way, a spirit of discouragement
grips the soul of the community.

The people speak against God and against Moses,

"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt
to die in the wilderness?" they complain.

"For there is no food and no water,
and our soul loathes this worthless bread!"

God is fed up with their ingratitude,
and releases the people to the consequences of their complaining.

They are, to be sure, still in the desert wilderness.
Snakes of desert fire slink into the community,
and they sting,
and many of the Israelites die.

Chastened by the consequences of their complaining,
humbled by life in the wilderness,
the Israelite community comes to Moses and says,
"We have sinned against God and against you;
pray to God to take the snakes of desert fire away from us."

So Moses prays for the people.
(We are not given the words Moses speaks.)

God says to Moses,
“Craft yourselves a banner of this desert fire.
When everyone who is stung actually looks at the banner,
they shall live.”

Through these words, may we hear a Word of hope. Amen.

* * *

Forty years into the wilderness. Can you imagine?!

This ragtag band of ancient Israelites seeking safety, led by Moses, has forged a path through *every* part of the desert. They leave no cactus unturned.

In truth, an actual journey from Egypt to Canaan on foot in the ancient world should, by all rights, take two weeks. Perhaps a bit longer with such a large caravan.

But forty years?!

Something has gone terribly wrong.

Only one year into COVID you and I have a sense of that what that “something” might be: the people, even when given good instruction, just cannot get their act together.

Some of them can, yes. *Of course* you and I can! But all those *other* people just do not get it. They mumble and they grumble. They reject and they rebel. They forget and they fret. They fail to trust God and do the footwork. Over and over and over again.

It is not fair.

You can almost hear the SPC clan in the midst of the ancient Israelite nation: *what are you people thinking!? Wear the darn mask! Stay home! Watch out for snakes! Get your vaccine! If we rush things, they get worse!*

And we are right! But we are not the only clan in the community.

The snakes of fire can sting *anyone*, not just those who do not follow instructions. That forty years in the wilderness ends up belonging to all of us, and not just all of those *other* people who “do not get it.”

It is not fair. It just *is*.

This is one of the final lessons of this COVID Lenten wilderness, as the ancient Israelites near the end of their journey: quit your complaining; face the brutal facts; and use this crisis to prepare you for a better future in loving community with God and all creation, with liberty and justice for all.

In the business world, this lesson is called The Stockdale Paradox, named after Admiral James Stockdale, a Prisoner of War in Vietnam. The Stockdale Paradox describes a psychological duality of stoically accepting reality on the one hand, while maintaining an unwavering faith in the endgame, on the other.

For Admiral Stockdale, this psychological duality - this paradox of brutal honesty mixed with unwavering faith - carried him through eight years of torture in a foreign land. He had no legal representation, no release date, no sense of when the torture would end.

In hindsight we know he was eventually released, reunited with his family, and even able to thrive on the other side of this crisis. But in the moment - in eight long years worth of moments - he had no idea what would unfold.

When asked how he made it through, Admiral Stockdale said, "I never lost faith in the end of the story ... not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which in retrospect, I would not trade."

But Stockdale does not confuse faith in the end of the story with unbridled optimism. "The optimists" Stockdale says, "were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died for a broken heart."

"This is a very important lesson," Stockdale concludes, "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end - which you can never afford to lose - with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

This is our lesson on this fourth Sunday in Lent, one year into worshiping at home in the first global pandemic of our lifetimes. With our coronavirus banner before us. Trusting the outcome to our loving liberating God, while telling the truth of our reality.

That number 40 in the Bible: forty years in the wilderness, forty days and nights of rain in the story of Noah's Ark; forty days for Jesus in the wilderness after his baptism; forty days in this Season of Lent; in the Bible that number 40 is more symbolic than literal.

It means "as long as it takes to learn the lessons that need to be learned."

So what lessons do we need to learn?

One hard lesson is the truth of who we really are as a nation.

We as a nation - not you and me, but *we* in this COVID wilderness - have accepted 535,000 deaths in this country alone. One person per minute these past twelve months, including one of our own.

We as a nation - not you and me, but *we* in this COVID wilderness - have accepted death and unemployment more devastating for Black Louisianians than Hurricane Katrina, with similar stories playing out across the nation.

We as a nation - not you and me, but *we* in this COVID wilderness - have accepted death at twice the level for Native American communities as for white Americans.

Scientists are trying to tell us - and have been trying to tell us for a year now - that this virus cannot, any time soon, be eradicated or even eliminated. Not because the science will not allow it but because we as a nation - not you and me, but *we* in this COVID wilderness - even when given good instruction, just have not – yet! - gotten our act together, with justice and liberty for all.

The scientists knew what to do. But we were impatient. And now there is SO MUCH NEEDLESS LOSS.

We have learned a hard lesson about who we really are as a nation. Even if many of us have done the right thing, the forty year wilderness of mumbling and grumbling, rejecting and rebelling, forgetting and fretting, failing to trust God and do the footwork belongs to us all. And has hurt the most vulnerable hardest.

But we do not give up hope!

Even in the face of the worst that is in us, we do not lose our unwavering faith in God's endgame. We do not give up hope in God's vision of The Beloved Community, that land of promise and plenty, where all are fed, and all is repented and repaired, and all is forgiven, and all has been healed, and all live together in justice and peace. We do not give up hope in the promise of the peaceable kingdom, no matter how close or how far it may appear.

Because we have also, in this past year, learned lessons of grace in the wilderness:

We have deepened our friendships. We have strengthened sibling relationships. We have formed a bond with all of humanity: every single person on this planet has a common enemy. Even your Luddite pastor has embraced the connections technology provide.

We have cultivated a quiet creativity. We have nurtured compassion. Even introverts have learned the value of a good old in-person human ruckus.

And love. Who knew we could come to love one another so deeply, as pastor and people, through a Zoom screen?!

That, in the end, is the lesson God is really trying to teach the ancient Israelites - and us - through the forty year wilderness journey, through a long unending COVID Lent.

That, in the end, is the lesson God is really trying to teach us through the wilderness of life: how to love God - in all of God's mysterious being - and how to love one another, and how to love ourselves.

Faith, hope, and love are, in the end, the only things that last forever. We have such a short time on this planet. It can be taken in a moment. COVID has taught us that. Don't waste your time on what does not last.

Instead, join me in the truth of the Stockdale Paradox: let's quit complaining; let's face the truth of who we really are in all of our glory and all of our greed; and let's place our trust finally and forever in the God who loves us beyond compare. And is working overtime - for all time - to make us *well*.

Let the church say, Amen!