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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21
Weariness on the Road

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ANYWHERE BUT HERE!

Toward the end of this sermon, I mean to speak of that golden text, John 3:16-17. But I want to begin by speaking of “Weariness on the Road.” My sermon is motivated by our First Lesson and the story of the Israelites wandering around in the desert for forty years. I have sympathy for those weary and footsore Israelites. Forty years is a mighty long time. We see in our Bible story that they became downhearted -- so discouraged that they murmured against the Lord. The Lord rebuked them and brought misery upon them, and glad to say, they repented and returned to the Lord. Still, it seems to me that their falling into discouragement is a *human* kind of thing. In this fallen world, we too might pass through certain seasons of life when we are discontented, when the morning sun seems no longer to rescue us, and when we yearn for olden days, when we were younger and stronger. Or perhaps we yearn for future days when we imagine we will be more settled and secure. “Anywhere but here!” is the cry from the soul. So I have tried to imagine the weary ways of the Israelites and their discouragement. As I have thought about them, a certain text again came to mind -- a text from the New Testament that I recently referred to when discussing the story of Cain and Abel. It is a text that acknowledges the ebb and flow of our emotions, but urges us to refrain from sin. Here it is, from Ephesians, Chapter 4:

²⁶Be ye angry, [but] sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath:
²⁷Neither give place to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26-27, KJV)

The error of the Israelites was not that they were discouraged, but they gave too much place to the devil. Let’s look at the story.

A BYGONE TIME

The Exodus from slavery in Egypt is, of course, a mighty wonder. It is a story to be cherished by Israel and by the church forever. Yet, by the time of today’s story, the Exodus is a wonder from a bygone age. Forty years have passed. The great wonder of walking through the sea dryshod was a wonder enjoyed by an earlier generation. By the time of today’s story, most of that early generation has died. Indeed, the high priest Aaron has only recently died by the time we get to our chapter, Numbers 21. Err long, Moses will be gone too.

So, the Israelites have been wandering in the Sinai Peninsula for forty years. Their goal is a good land. They call it the Promised Land, and it bears a beautiful description: It is a land “flowing with milk and honey.” They are close to it. Forty years of wandering, and now they are close to their destination.

But there is a diplomatic hurdle to be crossed. It shouldn’t be too hard. The wandering Israelites need official permission to approach the Promised Land via what is called “The King’s Highway” in the land of Edom. So, Moses applies for permission. Let me read aloud the story of how that goes:

¹⁴Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom, “Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the adversity that has befallen us: ¹⁵how our fathers went down to Egypt, and we dwelt in Egypt a long time; and the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and our fathers; ¹⁶and when we cried to the LORD, he heard our voice, and sent an angel and brought us forth out of Egypt; and here we are in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your territory. ¹⁷Now let us pass through your land. We will not pass through field or vineyard, neither will we drink water from a well; we will go along the King’s Highway, we will not turn aside to the right hand or to the left, until we have passed through your territory.” ¹⁸But Edom said to him, “You shall not pass through, lest I come out with the sword against you.” ¹⁹And the people of Israel said to him, “We will go up by the highway; and if we drink of your water, I and my cattle, then I will pay for it; let me only pass through on foot, nothing more.” ²⁰But he said, “You shall not pass through.” And Edom came out against them with many men, and with a strong force. ²¹Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his territory; so Israel turned away from him. (Numbers 20:14-20, RSV)

This seems to have been the straw that broke the camel’s back. The Israelites can almost see the Promised Land. They can almost smell the milk and honey, like my cat, Nermal, sniffing the air for the milk when we eat our Cheerios. But now the King of Edom refuses the reasonable request of Moses. Not only does the King refuse, but he comes against the Israelites with a great show of force. Nothing remains, then, but to take a roundabout way of approaching the Promised Land. It is a roundabout way that forces them away from the safety and ease of the King’s Highway out into the wilderness.

There is a kind of horror of the wilderness in the soul of the Israelites. In Jeremiah, we read of how dreadful the ancient wilderness seemed to the Israelites:

...the LORD that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, that led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought, and of the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt? (Jeremiah 2:6, KJV)

The Israelites do not want to be here, in the wilderness. They've seen too much wilderness -- forty years of it! They do not want to circle out into the desert again. They want simply to march on the King's Highway right into the Promised Land.

WHO CAN BLAME THEM?

And who can blame them? It is the same with us. In our vocations, for example, we might feel from time to time that we have been in the desert getting on too long now! It is so arid here! When are we going to get some shade against the heat of the day? When is someone going to nurture *us*, or at least be more patient with us as we gain our skills and seasoning? In our jobs we can reach the stage when we are tempted to say "Enough is enough! We've been in this doggone desert long enough."

Likewise with our relationships. My heart goes out, for example, to young adults hoping and praying that their relationships will develop into marriage. She would love for her young man to get down on his knee and ask for her hand. She would say "Yes!" If only he would ask! And he is romantic too. He too is mindful that the years are slipping by, and it would be good to marry and settle down, only he does not feel quite prepared yet. He does not feel quite worthy enough of her. Or he wonders what she might be wondering too: Are we just too different? Would it be wise to pledge to love and cherish each other for the rest of our lives, as long as our hearts are beating, when there are some deep differences between us? Meanwhile, they live this unsettled life, wandering in the wilderness. Marriage seems within sight, just beyond the Jordan River, but they are not there yet and they are getting weary.

Again, it might seem that we've been in the desert too long now when it comes to our health or spirits. We have had full measure of illness or depression. And then, at last, when it seems that we are approaching a season of health and spiritual refreshment, something else happens and we are knocked down once again. We were doing well, marching toward the promised land, but that mean King of Edom said "No" and launched us into the desert again.

We human beings can be ground down by poor health, financial stress, and the continual "changes and chances of life." And so it is that we can find ourselves echoing the murmuring of the Israelites of old. We murmur because we are discontented.

ST. PAUL

The apostle Paul himself seems to have been weary of life and to have yearned to get on with his pilgrimage to heaven:

²³For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: ²⁴Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. (Philippians 1:23-24, KJV)

He is willing to remain in this vale of tears and to continue his ministry, but he can hardly keep from sighing for a better life.

So it is with our human race: From time to time, we know seasons when we suffer delay and interruption on our way to the Promised Land. We sense and pray that there is a land flowing with milk and honey ahead, but meanwhile, we are becoming worn out by poverty or illness or loneliness or by the indifference of a busy world.

THEN, WE MUST LOOK TO CHRIST

Then, when all feels on the edge of exhaustion in the wilderness, so that we cry out in earnestness, "Lord, save me, else there is no one to save," it is with us as it was with the ancient Israelites: we must look to Christ. They looked to a bronze serpent set on a pole. We get to look at the man himself, even Jesus Christ our Lord. As St. John says, he has been "lifted up" -- indeed lifted up on a rugged cross. And in looking to him, we look to our Saviour.

What is this like? This looking to Christ: What is it like? Let me give you a comparison. It is a happy story from the Acts:

¹Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. ²And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at that gate of the temple which is called Beautiful to ask alms of those who entered the temple. ³Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked for alms. ⁴And Peter directed his gaze at him, with John, and said, "Look at us." ⁵And he fixed his attention upon them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶But Peter said, "I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." ⁷And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸And leaping up he stood and walked and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. (Acts 3:1-8, RSV)

"Look on us," said the apostles. "Look with hope. Do not despair and think things are always going to be tough. Do not suppose that you are condemned to the desert forever."

Even more for us: let us look on Jesus. Do not let the hardships of our way deprive us of our one true source of comfort in this fallen world: our Lord Jesus. Do not let the howling winds of this desert world drown out the one reliable shepherd of our souls, whose direction is safe and who lives to make things turn out well, even Jesus Christ our Lord.

OH! THE COST OF THIS LIFTING UP!

Finally, let me say a word about the cost of our salvation. It is not so bad to take inanimate bronze and pound it and work it into the form of a serpent and

attach it to a pole. The craftsman exercises the skill his years and training have brought him. He fashions the serpent, attaches it to the pole, and the work is done. But the raising of the Son of Man on the Cross: now that is a different matter. It is hard to take it in. The lifting up of the Son of Man also involves pounding, but it is the pounding of spikes into human flesh. It involves agony.

Why? Why does the Son accept this? Why do the Father and the Holy Spirit consent to it? Love did it. Love is the cause:

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

¹⁷For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

There is a cause so compelling in the mighty heart of God that he is willing to suffer for that cause! And you are the one! You are the cause. You are the one he had in mind.

You might truly be a long time in the wilderness now. But the only begotten Son of God so loves you that he has plunged into the wilderness after you – into the desert where he was tempted, into the Garden of Gethsemane where he was terrified, and onto the Cross where he suffered. Love made him do it. And he asks that we join in such suffering love till he fetches others too and brings us all through into this kingdom—the kingdom of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever. Amen.