

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 130

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

From Death to New Life

In the church calendar, or what we call the liturgical calendar, there are two times when the colour pink is highlighted. We see it on the third Sunday in Advent represented in the pink candle of the Advent wreath and, little known at least by many protestants, is that the fourth Sunday in Lent is also represented by the colour pink. Pink is the colour of joy for the church. As one writer put it, "...it signals a moment of joy in the middle of seasons that are normally marked by preparation and [reflection]. The colour is a gentle reminder that even while we wait, repent, and reflect, the light of Christ's coming and the hope of Easter are already breaking through. It is the Church's way of saying: pause, rejoice, and remember that God's promise of salvation is drawing near."¹

And that is joyful and hopeful. We know how this story ends so we know the Good News that God's love in Jesus has overcome death so we can rejoice. However, it takes a little work to get to the joy in the scripture readings today. They are all a little unsettling to say the least and horrifying to take it to the extreme.

Now, as has been the case throughout Lent we have more than one reading that we are linking together to find a common thread that pulls together an overall theme from Old Testament to the New. I could preach on each of these individually as there is much to learn and understand in each reading, but that is not the aim of this sermon. In fact, I am going to tell you straight up what I hope you are able to find as a theme throughout before I get into the nitty gritty. Each of these scriptures is about what happens when we do or do not respond to God's invitation to live our life in trust that God's got this. If our response to God is to turn away or make a decision that does not put our trust and faith in God first, then death is the result. It is not death in the sense that we take our last breath, but death in the sense that we do not live our lives as fully as God hopes for us. We live without the same meaning and purpose that happens when our response to God is to trust fully that God is with us, that God wants us to live transformed lives. God wants us to live fully as image bearers of hope, peace, joy, and love. So let get into the scriptures and figure out how God is getting us there.

Remember when I said that some of these scriptures are at extreme horrifying? Well, it was to Numbers 21:4-9 that I was referring. A little background here. The Israelites are

¹ Facebook post on *Prayer Request*. Posted March 14, 2026.

wandering about in the wilderness and had been for a long time. They were disgruntled ... again. I wouldn't be too harsh in judging them. It is crappy to not know where you are going and stay motivated. But over time they have complained. Craig Kocher writes,

“The people did not like the bitter water of Marah, so the Lord showed Moses how to sweeten it. They complained about the lack of food, so the Lord gave them manna. They complained that they were thirsty. Moses struck the rock at the Lord's command and water gushed forth. When the march resumed after Sinai, they were back at it again, asking for meat to eat. A wind from the Lord brought quails, but the birds were accompanied by a plague. In numbers 14 the people rebelled at the prospect of invading Canaan. They were saved from exterminations by and angry God through the intercession of Moses, but the Lord decreed that none of those who tested the Lord “ten times”, including Moses, should ever set foot in the promised land, except for Caleb, Joshua, and the innocent children.²

And then we have this final complaint as the story goes, “From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.”³

Now if you are like me and you are not too keen on snakes, then this scripture is haunting in the first place, but to consider God sending poisonous snakes to kill people is one of the reasons people think of God as the great judge in the sky who is more likely to be vengeful than loving. And to get to the heart of this, if I could, would take some time, but even in all this God hears the voices of the people and gives instructions to Moses so that those who choose can be saved by looking at another poisonous serpent made out of bronze and set on a pole. The thing to note here is that people had a choice. It may not have felt like much of a choice, but it was a choice to respond and live or not.

And without this background you cannot hear the reading from the Gospel of John without understanding how it connects to God and how our response to God can lead to death or to life, remembering that death and life here are as I explained earlier. This reading starts out referring to the serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness. When people looked at that bronze serpent they lived. When Jesus refers to himself being lifted up, he is promising eternal life. This is followed by a verse that many of us had to

² Kocher, Craig. *Feasting on the Word: Year B Volume 2 Lent through Eastertide*. Editors David L. Bartlett, and Barbara Brown Taylor. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville. 2008. P99.

³ All scripture quotations taken from *New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition*. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

memorize in Sunday School, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

We pull that verse out without the surrounding verses that are helpful in understanding that, with Jesus, things have changed. Things have changed for all people and because of God’s love there is a better way to live. Life that is eternal in our present time and in our dying. When I say life in our present time, it is about making a decision to respond to God’s love, care, and provision in times of abundance and times of crisis. The word, judgement, that carries with it such a negative connotation, can also be translated as crisis, discernment, or decision. And understood that way, verse 19 comes across differently. It is not God who judges, but rather that by our own decisions we judge whether or not we are going to love darkness or light. Whether or not we are going to respond to God or keep living in ways that rob us of the fullness of life.

Ephesians continues the theme of death to life. If we follow the desires of flesh and our senses it leads to death. And think of these things in terms of anything that robs you of your freedom, things like idolizing power, money, or prestige. Or it could be addictions, habits, choices that you know in your heart are not the best you could make for yourself. This is what leads to death in the sense that you are not living fully as an image bearer of light and love.

Then consider the word that the writer of Ephesians speaks about...grace. Grace is a gift, a free gift to believe that God’s got you. You don’t have to work for it, you just get this free gift of life, a transformed life that has meaning and purpose that fills you up, makes you feel fully alive even if times are trying or difficult, because you know that you do not walk through this life alone. The response to this gift is to choose to live in ways that bring healing and hope to others. Love and light to people who didn’t know that there is love and light beyond what they are experiencing.

This grace is a sense that you are lifted up, pulled up out of the muck and mire of life, to live more fully, more intentionally as an image bearer of God This image is seen in Jesus. Jesus who spent time with those who were hungry, longing for meaning, longing for freedom, longing for justice. This is where God is. God through Jesus, who is the new covenant, the new promise of God’s love and provision, is offering what God always wanted for humanity, life and life abundant.

Our decision to respond to God’s invitation to new life is one we make each and every day. God loves us, but we are not puppets, we have choice. We can choose to live redeemed lives or continue in the struggles of life without God. Psalm 130 is a great example of the struggle to choose and the hope of God’s great power to redeem. There are sorrow and frustration, sin and death, but God in Christ sees us through the sacrifice and love of Jesus that is steadfast and powerful. In Christ we are forgiven, redeemed, loved, and filled with grace for ourselves and one another. That is something to be joyful and joy filled about.

Today may you pause, rejoice, and remember that God's promise of salvation is drawing near and choose to live your life in the Spirit of Jesus. Amen.