

More than conquerors

Numbers 21:4-9

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The vast, conquering army had crossed the border and the first miles of desert. They had crossed relatively quickly and their enemies were caught off-guard.

But, the enemies were not sleeping; they were watching. There had always been rumours of an invasion but now it was here. Defense troops were sent to the barricades and a murmur of concern went up among the defenders: “Who are we against so many?”

But strangely, other than for a few skirmishes with weaker defensive positions, the vast army didn't attack. As the defenders watched from lookout positions, there seemed to be confusion among the thousands arrayed against them. The army moved first this way, then that, and all the while a great tumult could be heard. There were no clear clarion calls; there was only shouting and anger, as one soldier appeared to turn on another.

The enemy lookouts could not even make out the General in the midst of the army. In vain they looked for where orders were being issued, but could see only swarming and confusion and disarray. Smiling, the enemy lookouts reported back to their defensive positions: “No attack seems likely. Let us ‘go home and get a nice quiet sleep’.”

That vast army in the desert would one day be known as Israel, but it was not yet Israel, much less a real army. It was a fractious band of slaves, members of 12 different and often opposing clans or tribes. Oh, yes, it had left the great civilization of Egypt in ruins, its economy destroyed, its first-born slaughtered, and its army – one of the most advanced in the ancient world – routed on the shores of the sea.

But, the slaves had not struck a single blow themselves. They had no idea how to fight. And now, the desert before them was laced with Canaanite fortifications with troops riding in iron chariots. The slaves had no food supply, no water supply, and the only weapons they had were the swords and spears they grabbed when they left Egypt and the jawbones of animals that had died along the way.

They had no discipline. They argued with each other and their leaders. Remember, they had been slaves for four hundred years. The only code that had kept them going during that time was the code of survival, which boils down to one principle: survival. Purity? Respect? Fidelity? They may be nice options, but they are not values that help someone to survive slavery.

And who had survived? The young and fit. The old and infirm had been killed off by the hardships of slavery, several hundred thousand strong children, teenagers, young adults, and a few hearty middle-aged, most with a good forty years of life ahead of them.

They had never determined their own destiny. Like children, they had always been told what to do. So, now they had no idea how to govern themselves or who should govern them. Moses? Why? Ok, he can do amazing things, but this God he keeps talking about: where is he?

But, lead where? They had no idea where they were going! They were headed to a land that they had never seen. The only land that they had ever known was Egypt, a rich, fertile land. You might say, “Oh, but the promise of a new land, a return to the land of their ancestors, must have been so compelling.” Not really: just ask yourself how many immigrant children yearn to go back to the hold country to live again, especially after hundreds of years living in a new land. How many African-American slaves returned to Africa after the Civil War? Most stayed right where they were, in the South.

Chances of reconstruction seem much better than the odds of this motley band of slaves becoming Israel!

The story in Numbers 21.4-9 is just one of many snap-shots that we still have of the several moments of crisis facing these freed slaves as they made their fractious, chaotic and circuitous progress toward the land that Moses was sure God had given them. But it is an important one.

It happens when Moses is more than ever alone. His brother and fellow-leader Aaron had just died. Shortly before that his sister Miriam had died – the one who probably put him in the little reed basket to save him in Egypt. They had buried Aaron on the “Big Mountain” (which is what “Hor” means in vs 4). Moses knew that the people probably were murmuring: “Too bad Moses wasn’t the one who died! Aaron understood us. He would have given us food to eat. Even Aaron suffered at Moses’ hands. You can’t trust this Moses.”

In the morning, Moses gave them more reasons to doubt. He told them that they would be unable to challenge their distant cousins, the sons of Esau, who were standing between them and the Promised Land, and so they must make a huge detour away from the Promised Land and back, in fact, toward Egypt!

21.4a: And so they set out from Big Mountain toward the sea in order to go around the land of Edom.

It was too much for this people who would again be this close to Egypt and further than ever from this so-called Promised Land.

21.4b: And along the way the people’s spirit became short.

We might say to them: “Hang on. We know the rest of the story. It all turns out well for you in the end”. You and I can say this because we know what happens. But we can also say it because, unlike the people in the desert, you and I are surrounded by the comforts and joys of life. We can be “magnanimous”, big or long in soul, and are somewhat upset when others are not. But, when you are under stress, especially great stress, like slaves, or prisoners, or those with a medical sentence of death hanging over them, your soul becomes smaller and shrinks until you have little soul to share with anyone. Remember, they still know only one rule of life: survival.

And it is in survival mode, the people speak, against Moses **and** against Moses’ God:

21.5: The people spoke against God and against Moses (saying): Why did you bring us out of Egypt in order that we might die in the wilderness? (For we will die) since there is no bread and there is no water, and our spirits loathe this stupid bread.

They accuse Moses **and** Moses’ God – whom they have never seen – of misleading them. Oh sure, Moses’ God has provided them with Mannah, but what kind of food is that?

Now, I’m not sure what you eat daily, but I will venture a uses that you do not eat just one thing and one thing only every day, morning, afternoon, and evening. If you had to, you’d probably complain, too. And they do complain: the word that the people use to describe the mannah, a word that I have translated as “stupid” is actually a word that cannot be used in the pulpit of a church today.

But, no matter how, ahem, “stupid” this bread is, it is God’s provision. What follows happens not because they swear but because they reject the god who provides them with what they need to survive and the direction they need to defeat their enemies without putting them in harm’s way. This is mutiny. And if you allow mutiny, the game is over. So God quashes the mutiny.

21.6: So the Lord sent against the people “seraphim” serpents. The serpents attacked and bit the people and a large number of Israelites died.

The mutiny in the desert was punished as God sent “seraphim” serpents as a punishment. These serpents were probably the copper-skinned Sahara horned viper, which still exists in the Negev desert today. They hide in the sand, where it is cooler, and then when threatened or when food is in range, they burrow with lightning speed and throw themselves from the sand into the air at their target, so that as they exit the sand, the sun catches their copper scales and they gleam like burning firebolts in the sunlight.

And then when they hit their target, they dig their fangs in and inject their victims with a venom that also burns. The text only tells us that when the people were bitten, they died. It spares us the details of their deaths. This is fortunate for the fainthearted, and since I have already had one member of a congregation to which I was preaching faint when I went into too many medical details, I will spare you the details. ☺ But suffice it to say that the deaths were not immediate.

The serpent's bite killed slowly by injecting a burning chemical that kept the blood of the wound from coagulating and which slowly shut down the kidneys. Slowly, the viper's victims bled to death from the site of the bite and were poisoned from within.

Yikes! Quite a picture of God, isn't it? I'm sure that many of you are saying to yourselves: "Uhm, not my God!" The action of God goes against just about every good Canadian, liberal fibre in our bodies which says that people who make mistakes need to be educated and corrected rather than wiped out. It also goes against what many of us think is the Christian way of forgiveness.

But, the people have not made a mistake; they have committed mutiny. And, if the whole point of this long march through the desert is to turn this bunch of individuals and individual clans into one people, God's own people, then mutiny cannot be countenanced. If it is, just remember the Canaanite lookouts. They see the confusion, the disarray, the mayhem, and they send word back: "Don't worry, nothing to fear from these people. They are no danger to us."

The action of God, face it, the punishment of God, was intended not to destroy, but to shock the people to respond: it was swift; it was horrible; and it was effective.

21.7: The people came to Moses and they said: We have sinned since we spoke against the Lord and against you. Intercede with the Lord and he will turn back the serpent from us. Moses did intercede on behalf of the people.

With one voice – not with many voices – the people admitted their mutiny. They called it what it was: "sin", which is punishable by death. It was not a mistake. It was not an error of judgment.

And because the severe and swift punishment of God was effective, God relented ... at least for now.

21.8 The Lord said to Moses: Make for yourself a seraph and put it on a pole. When anyone who has been bitten looks upon it, that person will live.

21.9 Moses made a bronze serpent and put it on the pole. If the serpent bit someone, the person turned to gaze upon the bronze serpent and lived.

This is not an easy passage, and there is no complete agreement about how God's deliverance worked. But, note first what **is** clear: God did **not** remove the snakes. Removing the snakes would certainly have stopped further deaths from snake-bite, but it wouldn't have dealt either with those who had already been bitten, nor the very human tendency, once the punishment for sin is removed, if you survived, to get up, shrug your shoulders and say: "Wow, that was a close one". God's antidote deals with both problems: He provides healing for those who were still dying and He does not remove the threat of further punishment for those who wish to persist in mutiny.

But, what exactly did God provide to heal the people? It is not entirely clear but what we do know is that however it healed, it was by virtue of the fact that it burned. God told Moses **not** to set up a “burning serpent” as your translations have it, but “something burning”. It was the burning that would heal. That Moses makes the ‘burning something’ in the form of a serpent may be beside the point and may have been only to point to the fact that this antidote was only good for this particular sickness. No, what healed was not the image but the cauterizing that would burn the skin where the wound had occurred and stanch the flow of blood and somehow be inhaled through the skin and the lungs and go deep inside and burn but bring healing. It was not just a glance at a bronze serpent that would heal but a drawing close to gaze upon it, to draw near and feel the heat and light, to smell the very burning air around it, and be healed.

And it worked. But, it worked because it burnt and thus it hurt. It hurt in the same way as it hurts to look on a brilliant light, especially for those who have never known anything else than darkness. It hurt in the same way a wound that is cauterized hurts, especially if it is on a sensitive part of the body. It hurt in the same way that the waters of the nearby Dead Sea still today sting your eyes, as that chemical mist in the air penetrates and gives life to your skin. It hurts, but it heals your body. It was not just a passing glance at a statue that was required but a penetrating, cauterizing healing of a deep, deathly wound, possible only as the people drew near and took in that holy sacrament for their healing.

Friends, there are probably some of you here this morning who are amazed. Amazed that I would spend so much time on something that many of you must see as ancient history at best, the thinking of primitive peoples at worst.

Even some of you who believe the entire Scriptures to be God’s Word for our good and have even followed what I said with interest, have probably said to yourselves: “Wow. I’m glad that that was then, and this is now! God certainly isn’t like **that** anymore!”

The problem with that statement is that God **is** still like that. The one who never changes, who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, **is** still a jealous God, punishing the mutiny of those He calls into covenant with Himself. And what’s worse is that given that we now know what the tribes in the desert could never have known, namely that God calls **all** men and women into covenant with Himself, we cannot even begin to fathom how extensive the mutinies against God are around the world and throughout all time. Nor therefore can we imagine what kinds of punishments have been meted out by God as punishments against these mutinies.

So, you probably now are waiting for me to point a finger and identify these punishments. Is it AIDS? Is it a tsunami in south Asia? Is it an earthquake in Pakistan? Is it a ravaged Darfur or the escalating toll of human life in Iraq?

No, there it is! There, on the cross. There is the punishment. There is the place where, at a particular moment in time, God's own Son stepped down from his throne and threw Himself between the Father's punishing hand and the sinners, the mutineers who were to be punished.

In His dying he took into Himself the viper's poison and died the eternal death that the mutineers deserved. But, he didn't just take this poison into his system. He suffered the punishments of all time and space. For He took into Himself not just the poison of the bite of these serpents, but the poison from the very first bite of the first serpent in the Garden, and all of the suffering that was passed on from Adam's children to yours and your children's children.

This is what He had told that teacher of Israel, Nicodemus, that He was going to do even before it happened:

John 3.15 Just as Moses raised up the serpent in the wilderness, so also must the Son of Man be raised up, so that everyone who has faith in him may have eternal life.

Why?

John 3.16 Because God loved the world in this way, that that he gave his only begotten son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but have eternal life.

“Belief?” “Faith?” What really are these? Intellectual assents? A passing glance at the cross? No. Faith is what the people did in the wilderness at the foot of the pole on which the bronze serpent was placed and lived. They drew near to the burning thing and gazed on it. Its very presence hurt, but it healed them, inside and out.

Faith is not a passing nod to the cross or even the acknowledgement of its historic significance. Faith is to gaze upon the cross, high and lifted up, and to see there the crucified Lord. It hurts because drawing near we see the one who was completely consumed by the burning venom that would otherwise have consumed us.

The story in Numbers is pivotal. After this horrific event, the tribes were chastened and truly became one nation, a conquering people.

Today the cross is pivotal. God now calls us to be one people, brought together not just from 12 tribes but from every tribe and tongue and culture of all men and women of the entire world gathered at the foot of the cross.

But, in the shadow of the cross, He also calls us today to be more than conquerors. He calls those of us who have stood at the foot of the cross and gazed upon Him who gave Himself for us, now high and lifted up, not to go forth and possess physical lands and defeat enemy armies, but to go forth in His name and bring healing to mutinous men and women everywhere who are suffering needlessly.

He does so by leading us Himself. More than any other conquerer, Jesus who goes before us, the author and finisher of our faith, has defeated death itself for our sakes so that in Him no man or woman need taste death but so that in Him we might be more than conquerors who live and so bring new life to others.