Look and Live

Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14:21
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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This Sunday marks the one-year anniversary of the pandemic, at least as far as it has affected our church.

Sunday, March 15, 2020 was a day that I remember very well. It was the first Sunday that we cancelled in-person worship gatherings. I remember thinking, "well, this will probably last a few weeks, maybe a few months. It seems laughably naïve in hindsight.

I don't need to tell you that it's been quite a year. We're probably all tired and bored of talking about COVID right now.

At least there is light at the end of the tunnel. I know many in our congregation have already received their first vaccination or have appointments to do so. I think we're all feeling at least tentatively hopeful that things might return to something like normal by later this spring or summer.

I want to thank everyone in our church for the grace you have shown over the last year.

To me, personally. Not surprisingly, there was no "How to lead a church during a pandemic" course in my seminary training. And I have certainly had moments over the course of the past year where I have felt like I have no idea what I'm doing or what the right way forward is. Thank you for your encouragement and patience.

To those in church leadership who have had to make tough decisions and react to changing realities. This last year has asked a lot of our church council, worship committee, and deacons. Thank you for supporting them.

And to one another. I know that there are differing opinions among us. We have each experienced the last year in different ways. It has been harder for some than others. We do not all assess risk in the same ways. But I think we have tried to love one another well throughout this last year.

I want to appeal for grace in the coming months as well. We don't know what things will look like for our church.

As of right now, nothing has changed for houses of worship in our province. According to government regulations, we are still restricted to 15% of fire code capacity and must wear masks at all times, unless speaking from a microphone.

I am hoping that restrictions will be eased, and we will be able to meet without masks and in normal numbers by summer, but I obviously have no idea if this will be the case.

If there's one thing that the last year has taught me is that unpredictability is the name of the game.

So, thank you. And let's keep doing our best to love each other well as we make our way through what I hope is the homestretch of this pandemic.

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The famous twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich once proposed three stages in cultural development.

1. Stage one: We are haunted by the fear of death
2. Stage two: We are haunted by guilt
3. Stage three: We are haunted by meaninglessness

Ancient people, on this view, were terrified of death. It is difficult, if not impossible, to find a human culture on the planet that didn't have at least some theory of an afterlife. Death has always been conceived as a threat to human beings who stubbornly have "eternity set in our hearts."

Later, guilt took centre stage. We might think of Martin Luther here, who in the sixteenth century was almost paralyzed by guilt—he could never do enough, be holy enough, rid himself of enough of the sins which beset him. This led to a kind of crisis of faith and his "discovery" of justification by faith and not works which launched the Protestant Reformation.

In more recent times, our concerns, at least in the West, often seem to be with a loss of meaning. We and not plagued by guilt so much as anxiety. We live in a "you do you" culture where perhaps the last remaining sin is to judge another person.

We have largely given up on any big story of meaning "out there" that could impose upon us. Meaning is up to us to determine for ourselves.

But meaning seems to prove elusive, if the sociological date is to be believed.

Postmodern people still claim to desperately long for purpose and belonging. Skyrocketing levels of depression, anxiety, addiction, and loneliness (all of which preceded the pandemic) suggest, at least in part, that we are not finding the meaning that we crave.

So, death, guilt, and meaninglessness.

I don't think cultural history is quite as straightforward or linear as Tillich's three-part story. I think these three threats weave their way across all times and places to varying degrees.

But Tillich's way of telling the story is interesting to think about. I think even in my own story, this threefold journey makes some sense.

I don't remember when I first learned that to be human was to one day die, but it was not a pleasant discovery. I wouldn't say I was "haunted" by death as a child, but it was certainly a source of some existential discomfort.

And then, in my teenage years into young adulthood, guilt was certainly alive and well. I imagined God to be rather severe and stern and not to be trifled with. God was also *very* concerned with my every thought and motivation and action. I didn't have a crisis like Martin Luther, but I was certainly acquainted with the feeling of never being able to measure up to the commands of a holy God.

Later on, guilt gave way to more abstract questions of meaning. I suppose all of us get to a stage in our lives where we seek to understand our lives, our vocations, our relationships in terms of purpose. What is the point of all this? What will last? Is there a divine architect behind all this? What is God trying to say?

I don't know if your story would have any resonance with mine. But however these things might look in your life, it's a potent cocktail. Death, guilt, and meaninglessness.

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I think all three of these threats that haunt us show up in our passages this morning.

In our passage from Numbers, we encounter the people of Israel in the wilderness. They've been miraculously delivered by God from their long period of slavery in Egypt and are being led by Moses to the promised land of Canaan.

But it is a long and painful journey. Due to the stubbornness and disobedience of the people of Israel, they find themselves wandering in the desert for years.

Numbers 14 narrates how God punishes the people for failing to trust that God would lead them to the promised land, for complaining against Moses and God and longing to return to Egypt. God promises them that they will stay in the desert for forty years until the first generation of Israelites has all died.

So, they are in the wilderness. And they are complaining.

They grumble about the food and the lack of water and the generally unpleasant circumstances. And God has enough. The text says that God sends poisonous snakes among them as punishment and that many of the Israelites die.

The Israelites are distraught, and they beg Moses to pray that the Lord will take the snakes away.

The solution? Moses is instructed to make a serpent of bronze and put it up on a pole.

Everyone who looks at this bronze serpent is healed.

(Interestingly, as you probably know, the image of the serpent on the pole remains a symbol of healing to this day. I saw one on an ambulance on my drive in to church this morning.)

It's a very strange story to our modern ears. But the symbolism is unmistakable.

The Israelites are forced to confront that which is killing them. They are forced to look unflinchingly upon the death that their sin has wrought in the image of this serpent. They are forced to acknowledge their guilt.

And in facing their reality honestly, they are healed.

Our second text begins with a reference to this strange story.

Jesus is in conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus about being "born again" or "born from above." Nicodemus is having a hard time understanding what Jesus is talking about, and

Jesus seems a bit exasperated with him, wondering how Nicodemus can be a teacher of Israel and not understand the importance spiritual rebirth.

In the course of his explanation to Nicodemus about who he is and what he has come to do, Jesus refers to the story from Numbers: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Even though nobody would have imagined this at the time, Jesus was referring to when he would be "lifted up" on a Roman cross outside Jerusalem.

In both cases, there is "lifting up" for the sake of healing.

The Israelites looked at a bronze serpent on a pole and were healed from the poison of the snakebites. And those who "look" upon the cross are also healed, albeit on a deeper level and in a deeper way.

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So what does this mean for us today?

Like both the ancient Israelites and Jesus' contemporaries, we are well acquainted with the "poison" of evil set loose through decisions made by ourselves and by others, from the everyday events of our lives, in our relationships and communities to the global catastrophes we read about in the news every day.

Our contexts may be different in many ways, but like the people in both of our texts this morning, we need to look honestly at the ugliness of sin.

The cross is a deep mystery that we will never fully comprehend. It is an expression of love, of judgment, of paradoxical victory, of sacrifice, of forgiveness, of salvation.

But the cross is also an ugly symbol. The picture on the front of your bulletins is a picture I took in the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. It's ugly. Jesus looks emaciated, wracked with pain, godforsaken.

It is an ugly symbol for an ugly reality. This is what we do when God comes near. We kill the one sent to save us. We betray the one who holds out the word of hope. We choose the way of violence instead of the path of peace.

To use the language John uses, “the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

We continue the trajectory that began way back in the garden: *You have no need of God, for you can be like God…*

And, like the serpent on the pole in the wilderness, the cross of Jesus Christ says, loudly, “This is what you have done.”

The season of Lent is meant to remind us of this. As we draw closer to the events of Holy Week, we are reminded that we are implicated in these dark events.

We are invited to repent and, once again, to look up to the one who can heal and save.

In Numbers, the people simply had to look at the serpent on the pole for healing. The implication is that they trusted God as they did so, but the text indicates that all that was required was for them to gaze upon the serpent and they would be cured.

In John 3:16, Jesus uses the language of belief. “For God so loved the world, that anyone who believes in him will have eternal life.”

We are invited to look and to believe that this is how the poison comes out of our lives and our world. We are invited to be part of the process.

Belief, in the Jewish worldview, involves more than mental assent. We often think of belief as a purely conceptual task—we mentally agree to certain ideas and call it “belief.”

But in both the Hebrew and the Greek, the words we translate “believe” have a much more all-encompassing connotation. They mean “to trust,” “to rely upon,” “to be confident in.” They involve mental assent, but also include what we do.

Belief is a task for the head, the heart, the hands, and the feet.

Jesus knows that part of our healing involves us an act of our wills. Just like the Israelites in the desert, just like Nicodemus, we must acknowledge our condition and our need.

In Numbers, the Israelites acknowledged their sin and cried out to Moses for relief. Their healing was physical and immediate.

In the Gospel of John, a different kind of healing is in view. A deeper and more profound healing, a healing that goes beyond our physical infirmities and afflictions, and drills down into the deepest parts of who we are and what we need.

The cross is where the three threats I mentioned earlier collide with the love and the mercy of God.

On the cross of Christ, God defeats the power of death that threatens us. We find a hope that goes beyond the grave.

On the cross of Christ, God absorbs the weight of human sin and guilt. We find forgiveness for our sin.

And, on the cross of Christ, God sets us free to love without fear and to participate in the inbreaking kingdom of God. We find meaning and purpose in knowing that we are part of God's grand narrative of loving the world and us into new life.

May God help us to look up to the source of our deepest healing and restoration. May we believe—in the deepest sense of this word—in the one he has sent for our salvation.

May we look to the one who was and is driven by love for the world to take the poison for us.

May we look and live.

Amen.