

A GRACIOUS FACELIFT
Sermon, March 14, 2021
The Fourth Sunday in Lent
Texts: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin, who starred together in the popular 1980 film “9 to 5”, have been friends many years. On a joint appearance on the January 14, 2018 **Today Show** promoting their then-fourth season of Netflix’s **Grace and Frankie**, the host asked how long they’ve been friends. In her response, Jane Fonda estimated it had been fifty years. In her response, Lily Tomlin quipped, “*I think since before your first face lift!*” Well, don’t let the sermon title fool you. This sermon is not about that sort of facelift, the kind that “saves” appearance. The facelift referred to in our lectionary readings is about saving lives, and eventually our souls.

Our first reading was from the Old Testament book of Numbers. The original Hebrew name for Numbers was “Be Midbar” (בְּמִדְבָּר) -- “In the Desert” – for that was the main subject of the book; it is the record of the forty years of wilderness wandering of the people of Israel. When it was translated into the Greek Septuagint, the Greek word “Arithmoi” (ἀριθμοί) -- “Numbers” -- was given as a title, mainly because there are so *many* numbers, especially in the early chapters. The numerous numbers of Numbers can be numbing, but they also give a better appreciation for the sheer scope of God’s miraculous activity that took place during these years. For example, Chapter 1:1 -- *The Lord spoke to Moses ... “Take a census of the whole Israelite community ... listing every man by name, one by one ... all the men in Israel twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army.”* At chapter’s end we read the final tally -- *“All the Israelites twenty years old or more who were able to serve in Israel’s army were counted ... the total number was 603,550.”* Now if every one of these 603,550 draft-eligible men had just two family members (*spouses and/or children and/or parents*) ... that would mean a total population of just under two million. As prolific and family-oriented as they were, it is more likely the average family was Majeika-sized or larger! A low-ball estimate of the total population would be three million, but it could be as high as five or six million or more! Let’s go with the low-ball estimate of three million for now: I came across this little devotional twenty-one years ago, used it in a sermon then, and I like to bring it out every five years or so (*I used it in a 2005 sermon, in an April 2009 Fishermen’s News article and in a 2015 sermon. You may hear it again in 2026 or so if I’m still around!*)

“Moses and the people were in the desert, but what was he going to do with them? They had to get across the Red Sea, and in one night at that. Now, if a population of three million went on a narrow path, double file, the line would be some 800 miles long and would require about a month to get through. So, to get over in one night there had to be a space in the Red Sea at least three miles wide so that they could walk through approximately five thousand abreast. But then, there are other problems, even though the Red Sea and the Egyptian threat were now behind them. Each time they camped at the end of the day, a campground two-thirds the size of the state of Rhode Island was required, or an average total of some 750 square miles ... think of it! ... just for nightly camping. They had to be fed, and feeding three million people requires a lot of food. Using the United States Army Quartermaster General’s basic military issue standards, Moses would have to have had 1,500 tons of food each day. Do you know that to bring that much food each day, two freight trains, each almost a mile long, would be required? And remember, they were forty years in transit! And they would have to have water. Standard military issue for that number of people would be 11,000,000 gallons each day, needing at least two more mile-long freight trains equipped with tank cars for transport!” The devotional ended with this: “*Do you think Moses had this all figured out before he left Egypt? I think not! You see, Moses believed in God. God took care of these things for him. Now ... do you think God has any problem taking care of all your needs?*”

Not only did that three-mile wide chasm open up in the Red Sea (*roughly the distance from here to Dave’s Market on Airport Road*), and come crashing in again upon the mighty Egyptian army, but God supplied an adequate ration of food *every single day for forty years* for a population at the very least three times larger than the population of our state! Each and every day throughout their wilderness experience over a thousand TONS of manna were delivered right to their feet! Also, time and again God provided millions of gallons of water, at times from the dry rock itself; in fact, the latest occurrence took place in the chapter just prior to our reading this morning. When we pay attention, the mind-numbing numerous numbers in Numbers underscore the overwhelmingly miraculous provision of God’s blessings! Our reading today takes place near the end of the forty years of wandering; this is, for the most part, the second generation of travelers. Most likely the majority of these people were “desert boomers” who had been born in the desert. They really knew nothing *but* God’s miraculous and prolific provision every single solitary day of their lives, and perhaps were taking God’s provision for granted. Numbers 21:4 -- *“They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!’”*

Now, the reality was that there was food, and a daily supply of it (*by the way, the words “food” and “bread” are pretty much interchangeable in the original Hebrew*); as mentioned, the daily manna delivery from heaven had continued throughout the nearly four decades of wilderness wanderings. And there was water; we read in the previous chapter God had provided millions of gallons from the dry rock, so they should have been carrying adequate supplies. But they call God’s blessing “NOTHING.” They complained, in so many words, “*This is nothing! There is no*

bread. There is no water. It's not good enough. It's not exciting enough. We need something different! And we detest this miserable food!" Just a word about this phrase translated "miserable food." The literal translation of the Hebrew intimates that the vernacular is a bit, ah, *stronger* than what the NIV translates as "miserable." The actual Hebrew adjective here is one of the more common Hebrew words for "**curse**." They aren't just saying to God, "We detest this miserable food." They are actually saying, "We detest this cursed food." Or, if you want to put it even *more* in the vernacular (*assuming something cursed by God is something condemned by God*), what they are saying to God is, "We hate this d---ed food!"

They refer to this heavenly manna, this daily gift of perhaps a thousand-plus tons of nourishing food dropped in their laps every morning from heaven, this tangible, dependable evidence of divine blessing and care, as a *cursed* thing. This food is a generous **blessing**, and they call it **damned**. So, I think in response God gives them a taste of what it would be like *without* His blessing in one comparatively small area. We're told, "Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them." One commentator points out what the text doesn't tell us is the fact that the wilderness through which the Israelites traveled was *infested* with these venomous asps and adders (*just ask Cleopatra ... where do you think she got her fatal asp?*). Apparently, one of the quiet ongoing miracles of God's blessing and protection is that God had all along protected the Hebrews from being harmed by the snakes *that were already there*. It is quite possible that up until now, His divine hand had restrained the serpents from entering the Rhode Island sized campgrounds of this three million plus hiking party. In the face of their ingratitude, it was not so much that God took *proactive* action by sending snakes, as it was that He passively *removed* a small portion of His ongoing blessing and allowed the natural course of events to take place. He removed His protecting hand just a nudge. He "lifts" the little finger of one of His protecting hands ... and the snakes slithered on in, and did what snakes do.

Now, I know for every single one of us sitting here this morning, myself included, that things could be better. Especially during these times of pandemic restrictions, there are situations in all of our lives that are less than the best ... there are health and/or family and/or employment and/or personal issues that are difficult, frustrations that burden us almost every waking moment. In a fallen world, there really is something wrong with everything. On the other hand, however, even at our worst, I think we know we fare so much better than the overwhelmingly vast majority of this world's population. We enjoy many so many "routine" blessings of God's provision, protection and blessing; we have water, we have food, we have shelter, we have homes, we have cars that (*usually*) work, and many of us enjoy good health and safe neighborhoods. How much has God blessed, protected and preserved us in ways we only begin to be fully aware of? And yet how quick we are to complain and even curse, "This is not enough! Not good enough." I think one sub-message of this Old Testament text is, "Don't curse the blessings of God!" Our situations are tenuous enough! In our heart of hearts, I think all of us have some sense of just how vulnerable we are. How many "*venomous snakes*" does God routinely restrain for us? How many evils are held at bay in our lives by the merciful hand of God? How easily can things just ... fall apart? The company could be sued, the stock market could plunge, our health might change for the worse overnight ... we are dependent on God's grace in ways we can't even imagine. I like how one commentary on this passage expressed it: "*Even if the way is hard, it is a mercy that there is a way at all.*" Yes, it is a mercy ... so let us determine to be thankful for it.

You know, it is fitting that poisonous snakes came into play ... for ingratitude really can be a poisonous venom that will eventually destroy us. I've read that such a venomous snakebite induces a raging fever and creates in the victim a maddingly insatiable thirst before it kills. This is a sermon in itself, but what an appropriate image for the destructive insatiability of human sin and ingratitude; even our first parents found "*nothing was good enough*" while living in Paradise! The venom of ingratitude will cause the heart to shrink and shrivel and turn to stone; whereas gratitude has a way of enlarging the heart. Grateful people are big-hearted people who are a joy to God and a joy to be around. Well, it seems the Hebrews got the message. Rather than get angry with God for "sending" the snakes ("*How can a loving God send snakes?*"), they recognized just how tenuous and vulnerable their situation was without God's ongoing blessings and protection, and they readily confess their ingratitude. They acknowledge their need of God's mercy and protection; they acknowledge their need of gracious deliverance from this predicament largely brought on by ingratitude. God instructed Moses to make an image of a snake, put it on a pole, and lift it high for all to see; those who lifted their faces to the image would be saved; those who didn't, perished. The faithful understood by lifting their faces in obedience to God, they were looking to God's grace to save them.

And Jesus said, "*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.*" (John 3:14) In Numbers, the serpent was a symbol of death transformed into a symbol of life, a symbol of forgiveness, a symbol of salvation and healing. The cross was also a symbol of death; it was the instrument of the cruel, painful death of crucifixion. In both Old and New Testaments, we have symbols of death ordained by God to become symbols of life, grace, forgiveness, salvation and healing. This Old Testament image of death was transformed to an image which took away the sting of death. So it is with the cross of Jesus Christ; in a few weeks we'll be reading: "*O Death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?*" Those who in faith lifted up their eyes to the image of the serpent were healed by grace that came from above ... they saved from death, they were filled with gratitude, and went on to enter the Promised Land. And those who in faith lift their eyes to the cross of Jesus Christ shall be saved, as well, for all who look to Him will live.

And one day we, too, shall go on to enter the Promised Land ... the eternal Promised Land of God.