

Study Guide for March 11, 2018

Theme: The cross comes before the resurrection.

Readings: Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

This is the fourth Sunday in Lent, which means we have only a couple of weeks left in our spiritual journey. You have either found your spiritual stride and are making great progress or you hit a wall and abandoned your spiritual quest altogether. I am hoping it is the former. I'll admit Lent is a difficult but profound season. It stretches our tight places so we can bend in new ways. And it tears at our flesh to make at muscles we thought we could never have. But with Jesus as our Personal Spiritual Trainer, we're in good hands.

This week, as we look at the mistakes of the Hebrews, we get to see ourselves in an odd and often unattractive way – as whiners and complainers. But the story from the book of Numbers also shows God in an unflattering light as well. There are some things that seem a bit contradicting to the redemptive love that comes from the reading in John's gospel. I believe these two stories are perfectly paired up for this particular period in Lent (a time when we want to complain, when we feel miserable and want to give up). Both offer a redemptive story that showcase God's love and grace for all of God's people.

In each of these passages, we see how God delivers from death and brought us into life. The merciful and salvific actions of God were never in response to the good works of the people, but rather stem from God's love and grace. Now the Christian's identity is that of one saved by grace from the grave, from affliction and the desires of the senses. From that identity, we live into the way of life God intended, doing good and proclaiming God's goodness.

READ: Numbers 21:4-9

This passage finds the people of Israel after they have left Egypt and journeyed through the wilderness where they have become impatient on the circuitous route. You might be feeling that way yourself, and surely you feel entitled to grumble a bit louder than usual. But when God hears their malcontented refrain: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?" God responds by sending poisonous snakes among the people, killing many. Still feel like complaining?

Upon a first reading, this punishment hardly seems to fit the crime the Israelites commit. But this event is not an isolated incident. The people have complained before. They turn to Moses who intercedes for them, and God replies in an even more unusual way. The take away is simple. God hears our cries and responds. It might not be how we expect, but in the end it will always be life giving.

Q: In what ways do you identify with the Hebrew people, and how do those ways reveal God's grace and mercy to you?

Q: Can you think of a time you felt that God led you to a place of wilderness? And how and where do you see God accompanying you today?

Read: Ephesians 2:1-10; James 2:14-26

The author eloquently paints a picture of death and renewal in this passage. Before there was death, but now, through Christ, there is life. Before “we were by nature children of wrath,” but now we are seated in the heavenly places with God’s own son. All of this is accomplished through God’s grace, not out of any human work. This passage is often quoted to emphasize that humans do nothing to earn God’s love or grace, yet at the end of the passage the author states that we are “created in Christ Jesus for good works.”

True, there is nothing we can do to earn God’s love, but that does not mean that good works are irrelevant (James makes this point rather well). As Christians, our primary identity is in Christ Jesus, and so we are called to shape our life and live a way of life that reflects him. Therefore the reason Christians should do good works is not to earn God’s love or mercy but rather in response to God’s action towards us.

Q: How does your identity in Christ bring new or different duties in comparison to your duties as a parent, child, spouse, friend, employee, etc.?

Q: Identify some ways in which you struggle with “the desires of flesh and senses” that keep you from living the way God has prepared for you?

Read: John 3:14-21

In chapter 3, an important Jewish leader, Nicodemus, meets with Jesus at night for fear of his peers’ judgment. It is in this conversation that we find perhaps the most well-known Bible verse of all time, John 3:16. This statement of God’s love and promise of eternal life in Jesus is tied by John to the serpents in today’s reading from Numbers 21. Just as the instrument of affliction became the instrument for healing to the people of Israel, so through Jesus death itself becomes the vehicle for imperishability. Death, the very enemy of life, has become the portal into eternal life.

Q: What part of this familiar passage stands out to you?

Q: Death is still a frightening force in the world. What about death scares you?

Q: What strength do you receive in believing in God’s Son the way you do?

Slow Read: Psalm 107:1-22. I hope that you will take the time to find one word or verse to reread and meditate on. Before you begin, ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten your understanding and to guide your reading to the places you are struggling today. Remember, **You Are The One Jesus Loves**

Prayer: God, you have made me and chosen me to be your child. Help me to live my life in such a way that I will honor the sacrifice you made to redeem me, and to call me home. While I believe I am not worthy to receive your grace, you O Lord see me differently. For that I give you thanks, in the name of the One whose gave his life for me. Amen.