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*Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA*

*Fourth Sunday in Lent*

*March 14, 2021*

*Numbers 21:4-9; Ps. 1-7:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21*

It was exactly one year ago this past week that we were last worshipping here in the sanctuary together. On March 8, 2020 it was the Second Sunday in Lent, our Bridgebuilders visit to the Jewish Synagogue in Bellingham the previous Friday night had just been cancelled, and coronavirus cases were starting to rise in Whatcom County. The Executive Committee had started meeting weekly to make plans for keeping our congregation safe, and for that particular Sunday we had decided to avoid shaking hands during the sharing of the peace and after the worship service, and instead of holding hands around the communion table after receiving communion, we did the awkward move of touching elbows around the table instead.

And then, only three days later, we went full stop. In a letter to the congregation dated March 11, 2020 the Executive Committee announced that we would be holding worship solely online with only a few worship leaders socially distanced in the sanctuary. And then, on March 23, the entire state went into lockdown and all spiritual gatherings of any size were banned. And although we quickly pivoted and started producing meaningful Lenten worship services online from our homes, we probably feel at this point like we've been in Lent for over a year.

Although it's nothing like wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, what we feel is akin to what the Israelites felt as we heard today in the book of Numbers when they complained to Moses after he had led them out of slavery in Egypt: "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." And although we have not been bitten by poisonous snakes, our cry for the past year has been like the Israelites cry to God—please take this plague away from us.

And now, even as many in our congregation have been vaccinated, we are not out of this wilderness. We wonder how many in our community will still contract or even die from the virus. We wonder when we will be able to get back to some larger sense of normalcy. And we long to be back together in this building in person.

This week you'll find information in our Thursday church email about individual small groups of those who have been vaccinated and are willing to still wear masks who will now be able to meet in the church building, and at church council and the Worship and Music Committee we are actively talking about a plan to return to in-person worship when it is safe to do so.

But my goodness, even with some light at the end of the tunnel, we are still wandering in the coronavirus wilderness, we are still far from home, we are still broken people.

I always laugh a bit when I read the Israelites' complaint to Moses in the wilderness: "for there is no food and water, and we detest *this* miserable food." You remember what "this miserable food" is, right—the white, flaky substance on the ground called manna? It reminds me of a certain tween I know who looks at a full fridge of fruit and vegetables and says, "There's nothing to eat here."

I find it so very human that the Israelites complained to Moses in the wilderness, even though God was taking care of them, even while God was feeding them. And even though they continued to get bitten by poisonous snakes, when they looked at the serpent of bronze Moses made and put on a pole, everyone who was bitten lived when they lifted their eyes to it. They complained even while God was saving them in a dangerous wilderness.

Isn't the same true of us? Don't we also complain even while God is taking care of us? I wonder if we look back at this past year, how many times we too, have complained? Like the Israelites, we've complained to God about the plague we've been in, we've complained about our spiritual leaders, we've complained that we can't eat in restaurants, even though God has provided us enough food to eat.

I had a pastor friend once who wore one of those rubber bracelets for Lent, and as her Lenten discipline, every time she complained she had to move the bracelet from one wrist to the other. One day when I saw her, her hands and wrists were red and almost raw from moving it back and forth because she had complained so many times that day.

Complaining is one of the things we do best, and it's one of the easiest ways to forget that God is taking care of us. When we complain, we are essentially saying that we don't trust God to give us what we need, that we know a better way to do things than God does or that other people do.

The gospel we heard today from John, which includes probably the most well-known verse in scripture, John 3:16, is Jesus' response to a complainer. We often forget that these words Jesus spoke about God loving the world so much that God sent God's only Son so that all who believe in him may not perish but have everlasting life, those words were spoken to Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night to ask him about his nature, about how anyone could be born after having grown old, essentially complaining to Jesus about how any of these things could be?

But do you hear Jesus' compassionate response to Nicodemus in verse 16? God so loved you, God so compassionately takes care of you, that even when you feel you are perishing, God sent me to show you that you are being saved, both now and after death. And in verse 17, Nicodemus, God did not send me in to the world to condemn you, but in order that you might be saved through me.

Even in this past year of the pandemic when you have complained and doubted, even when you thought you knew better than God, God did not condemn you. God was always taking care of you.

This week I want you to read John 3:16–17 again and take these verses seriously: God so loved you, God so compassionately takes care of you, that even when you feel like you are perishing, Jesus is saving you, both now and after death. God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn you, but in order that you might be saved through him. And I wonder, if we take that seriously, what do we really have to complain about? Amen.