***TEMPTED TO BE IMPATIENT***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

March 11, 2018

Texts: Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:11- 16

Are you a patient person? Years ago when I was trying to decide whether I was being called to go to seminary or to continue practicing law I set several reasonable deadlines for God to let me know what to do. These were not arbitrary dates that I selected; these were dates that were important to future planning for me and for my law partners who were patiently waiting for me to figure out what I was going to do. It did not seem too much to ask God to make this call clear sooner rather than later, certainly no later than our partnership retreat in November of 1989. But God missed all of those reasonable deadlines that I set; the retreat came and went without any greater clarity in my call. So with a certain sense of exasperation I threw up my hands and said, “Okay, God. I give up. You let me know when you are ready to let me know.” A few weeks later, God let me know – at a stoplight. God was far more patient with me than I was with God!

How patient are you – with God, with others, with yourself? When I pray with folks in the hospital who are ill or recovering from surgery the prayer that seems to resonate most with them and/or their families is a prayer for patience to allow God’s healing work to be done. If the doctor says it will take four weeks to heal we want to be healed in two – and I am preaching to myself as much as to any of you at this point! We all need patience – patience for healing and patience for discernment and patience for living day to day. But a word of warning: if you pray for such patience, ask God to *give* it to you, don’t ask God to *teach* it to you. For learning patience can be a hard lesson! Just ask the people of Israel!

In the passage from Numbers that we read this morning we find the people of Israel making their way from bondage in Egypt through the wilderness toward the Promised Land. It was a long journey through an inhospitable environment fraught with perils – violent enemies, a searing sun, scarce water, not a Subway or McDonald’s in sight. And as the days stretched into months and the months into years and the years into decades the people became impatient – that is what the writer in Numbers says. *The people became impatient*, and their impatience found expression in complaints against Moses and eventually against God. *There is no water, no food, and what little food we have is lousy! Why are we even here?* The Israelites had whined before – repeatedly – but their cries seemed to reach a new pitch this time with a more accusatory tone, their complaints reaching all the way to heaven: *Lord, how could you do this to us? Why did you bring us here to die?* The people remembered their bondage in Egypt and suddenly it didn’t seem so bad in comparison with life in the wilderness. Aloud they wondered: *Could it be any worse than this God-forsaken place to which you’ve led us?*

There is a scene in *Duck Soup* in which Firefly played by Groucho Marx is meeting with Freedonia’s Secretary of War:

*Secretary: I give all my time and energy to my duties, and what do I get?*

*Firefly: You get awfully tiresome after a while.*

*Secretary: Sir, you try my patience!*

*Firefly: I don’t mind if I do, you must try mine sometime*.

Israel felt that God had been trying the people’s patience across those forty years in the wilderness, but if their patience had been tried by God, how much more had they tried God’s patience with their perpetual whining, fickle faith, and acts of unfaithfulness. Every time that they ran into a problem they cried out ***to*** God and eventually ***against*** God. When Moses delayed in coming down from meeting with God on Mt. Sinai they built a golden calf to worship. When life got hard they wondered how God could allow them to suffer so!

Perhaps similar sentiments have escaped your lips or crossed your mind. When nothing is going right and the news is bad, when your only luck is bad luck, when it all seems to be tumbling down around you and you feel – to quote the poet – “like death in an easy chair” – you may be tempted to join the Israelite chorus complaining against the Lord. **Or** perhaps you are one of those folks who projects into the future and sees things only getting worse, so that the difficulties of today are quickly projected into the certain disaster your life will be next month. If so, then you too may wonder how it could be any worse! **Or** perhaps you’re the pessimist who finds that not only is the glass half-empty instead of half-full, but you’re pretty sure there is a leak at the bottom so that it will be even emptier tomorrow – and you’ve pitched your tent with the Israelites, saying, “Lord, why me?” **Or** perhaps you have been waiting for an answer to prayer – and waiting and waiting – so that the waiting becomes extended misery and all you want is for it to end, and so you join the prayer of the psalmist, asking: “How long, O Lord? How long?” It is familiar territory in which the Israelites camped in the wilderness, and for all of you who would join your voice to theirs in asking, “Lord, how could it be any worse?” there is a divine answer: snakes!

When I was practicing law one of my clients was the former game commissioner for the Department of Fish and Wildlife for the City of Philadelphia. Now Philadelphia is not exactly teeming with wildlife (at least not the kind that the Fish and Wildlife folks regulate). Hayes was a good ol’ boy, an avid hunter and sportsman, a crack marksman who had won numerous awards for his shooting skills. Philadelphia seemed an unlikely place for him, so I asked what led him there.

He told me that before moving to Philadelphia, he and his wife lived with their two children in the mountains of Northeastern Pennsylvania. He had a home nestled in the woods far from his nearest neighbors and a big garden that fed his family and most of the forest animals as well. One sunny Saturday Hayes was working in his garden with his three year-old daughter by his side when his wife called out to say he had a call from his boss in the State Wildlife Department. He went into the house to take the call and was asked if he would consider a move to Philadelphia. It offered the possibility of better schools, more pay, and less rigorous work. It was tempting, but Hayes declined. As he hung up the phone, he heard a scream from the garden and ran out to find his three-year old daughter frozen on the ground in one of the rows with a rattlesnake coiled in front of her preparing to strike. Hayes jumped in to fend off the snake, swept up his daughter in his arms, ran inside, and called his boss to say he’d take that job in Philadelphia, if it was still available. That snake caused Hayes to reevaluate his options!

And snakes did the same for the people of Israel. Poisonous snakes, literally *fiery* snakes, infested the Israelites’ camp as they vented their impatience at God. Just when they thought they had hit rock bottom in the desert, snakes arrived with deadly bites to remind them that life in the barren wilderness could be worse. The Israelites, who had been railing against God, suddenly turned their complaints into cries of repentance, acknowledging their sin, and begging the Lord to take the snakes away. One wonders whether their story was the inspiration for the film *Snakes on a Plane* – a traveler’s worst nightmare: poisonous snakes with no escape in sight. The Israelites cried to the Lord, and the Lord heard their prayer, but the Lord didn’t take away the snakes; the Lord gave the people an antidote for the venomous bites; the Lord told Moses to make a bronze snake to be lifted up on a pole. By gazing up at the image of the snake, the Israelites would survive the fiery bites. And so they did. Life was a little better after that – they didn’t die, they stopped complaining, and they became more patient even though they were still in the wilderness with snakes lurking nearby.

How odd that Jesus would use this image to describe his own death and resurrection. “*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*,” says Jesus. The image of that bronze snake and its story would have been familiar to Nicodemus, to whom Jesus was speaking. He knew of God’s saving action there in the wilderness. Whether he could make the connection between that story and Jesus’ words to him is perhaps less certain, though something moved his heart, for according to John, Nicodemus was there at the tomb with 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes to lay to rest Jesus’ body after the crucifixion. Perhaps by then he understood what we understand with our post-resurrection ears, that just as God came to the Israelites to offer salvation from a venomous death, so God came to us in Jesus offering salvation from sin and death. Just as the bronze serpent was lifted up on a pole to bring salvation, so Jesus was lifted up – on a cross and at his resurrection – to bring salvation. Just as a sign of death – the snake – became for the people of Israel a sign of salvation, so another sign of death – the cross – has become for us a sign of salvation.

It is an odd story for Jesus to draw upon to make his point. The much-loved words which follow make a whole lot more sense to us:

*For God so loved the world that God gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*.

That is the good news that we proclaim – the good news, not of snakes, but of a savior, the good news of God’s love for all people, the good news of salvation in Jesus, the good news of eternal life that exceeds all our hopes and expectations. It is good news in one who was lifted up on a cross that we might live despite our whining and impatience and disobedience and sin. It is good news from a God who is far more patient with us than we deserve. Might you then be a little more patient with God? Amen