

Sermon Title: **“Patience and Grace on the Way”**

Bible: **Numbers 21:4-9 & John 3:14-21**

When: on the 4th Sunday in Lent, March 10, 2024

Where: about 25 people (plus YouTube viewers) at Gilroy UMC

Opening Prayer

O Lord, let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

1. Numbers, the Past, and Attachment

Today’s first scripture reading is from the book of Numbers. The book of Numbers is the fourth book in the Old Testament after Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus. It is one of the five books which are called the Jewish Torah, including Deuteronomy. The reason why this book is called Numbers is that at the beginning, God asks Moses to take a census of all the people of Israel after Exodus. It contains many numbers for the twelve tribes of the Israelites. The numbers cannot tell you everything, but they tell us some things, because they are somewhat measurable and objective. Today, daylight savings time started, so our clocks needed to be moved an hour ahead. If there were no clocks and no numbered measure of time, how could we make an appointment? If we could not pinpoint the exact time, we could not make an appointment. We might say, “Let us meet and have lunch.” If there were no clock and no numbered measures of time, when would lunch time be? Perhaps, it would be when the sun is in the highest position in the sky, and shadows are at their shortest. So, we are thankful for numbers, so that we can make precise appointments. On the other hand, numbers can tell us something, but not everything. When we eat, we can calculate the calories in our food using numbers. However, we cannot use numbers to describe the taste, smell, or the texture of the food and the atmosphere of the meal. We might measure them using a five-star rating system, but we also need reviews and real stories. To accurately remember our history, we need both

numbers and stories. And today's scripture reading from Numbers is one of the stories.

The Israelite people were complaining against God and Moses. In my understanding, they complained that there was no food and no water in the wilderness, compared to their life of slavery in Egypt. This might be a very rough comparison, but which one would be better, slavery with enough food and water or freedom with miserable food? Between the Exodus and the Red Sea in the wilderness, the Israelites had to make decisions. And what is your choice? I learned that one of the biggest challenges for victims is their attachments to the past. Even if they want to be free from their struggles, it is very difficult to detach themselves from their past struggles. Victims often need more time to be silent, cry, and heal, because of these attachments to the past. But the victims cannot stay there in the past, in order to be healed and move forward. Detaching oneself is necessary, even if it might be a painful process.

In Korean history, even after the pro-democracy movement in the 1970s and 1980s, people tended to vote for the followers or descendants of the dictators. They might still be attached to the past, when the powerful leader ruled over them without giving them any freedom but only oppression. In our individual lives, some victims of domestic violence from their parents tend to marry those types of potential domestic violence abusers. Some victims of alcoholic parents tend to marry that same type of alcoholic partner. The attachment is neither simple nor easy, because there was not only the poisonous past, but also the experience of the victims themselves.

2. Detachment and Liberation

How can we save victims from their poisonous past? In my understanding, the reason why

God sent the serpents is to warn the people to be aware of the poisonous attachment. And God showed that a way to life was to put the serpent of bronze upon the pole. The place of the poison is not in us, but out there away from us. Can we see the poisonous past like this, not in us, but out of us? To detach from the attachment is needed in order to be healed and live. There is a saying, "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater." We are just like a baby many times. We are so weak and fragile. But we do not want to live in the bathwater, right? It is okay to throw out the bathwater, the poisonous past and attachment, because it does not mean to throw out ourselves, but to save the baby and raise the baby.

In my theology, detachment means liberation, a liberation from the past, and towards life. But this liberation process is not sudden; it is gradual. It cannot be dramatic, but cumulative. The Exodus itself can be a beginning of liberation. To go from Exodus, through the Red Sea, and to the Promised Land took forty years. The detachment process and the way to liberation requires time. And it is an ongoing process, but it is how to live as a liberated people.

3. Patience and Grace on the Way

Do you like this ongoing process of liberation? I used to prefer a one-time, sudden, and dramatic transformation, because it is very simple and very powerful. It has happened to some people. The Apostle Paul can be a great example of one-time, sudden, and dramatic transformation. But it is not for me. In my faith journey, the liberation process is not sudden, but gradual, not dramatic, but cumulative. It is very slow, but steady.

The second reading from the Gospel of John is very famous, especially John 3:16. I believe that many of you have memorized it. As always, it is best to read the whole passage before and after John 3:16. I know that Jesus Christ came as the light. But the light was not always

welcome. Sometimes, because of my guilt, I do not want to come to the light. I am afraid of being condemned and punished. Sometimes, because of my shame as a victim as well as a sinner, I do not want to come to the light. I cannot admit and embrace myself as a victim and as a sinner. I do not want to turn the light on toward my past and into my life. It might be easy to turn it on and off. But I do not want to be in the light. To me, the light is so bright that I want to avoid it, and close my eyes against the light.

However, even though I close my eyes, I can still feel the warmth of the light. It takes time to feel the warmth. But there is definitely warmth in the light. The real light is not only bright, but also warm. The warm light slowly embraces each part of me, and each part of my past. There is God's patience in it for me. God is waiting for me to feel God's warm presence. I used to ask God, "Where are you?" But I slowly discovered God's warm presence in my past and in my life. God's grace was already there in the past and shining on my way. Sometimes, I envy the powerful and dramatic experience of God, but I am so thankful for God's gentle, warm, and graceful presence in my life. How about you? Do you have any sudden powerful experiences of God? Do you have any slow, gentle, and gradual experiences of God? God came to us as the light. During this Lenten season, I hope that you can encounter God, our Jesus Christ as the Light, in your past stories and in your daily lives. With God's patience and grace, God is shining the light toward each of you. May the light shine upon you and warm you in your past, now and forever.

Closing Prayer

Loving and living God, we come to you, as you are the light. We come for you to shine upon us in the darkness and to warm us in our cold and painful past. Please lead us to be closer to you day by day. In Jesus' name. Amen.