

Faith Mennonite Church  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent  
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Dying isn't the end; it's just the beginning  
*Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21, Ephesians 2:1-10*

At the Ash Wednesday service I attended in Goshen, Indiana, back in mid-February, the worship leader said that Lent is a time of acknowledging our limits. There is no richer or starker reminder of these limits than when we receive ashes on our foreheads with the words: "Remember from dust you were made and to dust you will return." We are finite creatures.

Coming to terms with our limits is the task of a lifetime. We would so much sooner think of limitless possibilities. Perhaps this is why the liturgical calendar gives us 6 weeks of Lent, compared to just 4 weeks of Advent. We need this extended time to be reminded of who we are--with all of our foibles and limitations--and to be reminded that God loves us as limited people made of dust.

Today's scriptures aren't about our final, physical death, however. They are about spiritual states of death in the course of our lives. One type of death, that depicted in the Ephesians passage, keeps us from living. Another kind of death frees us to live! Distinguishing the two is extremely important. You might say our life depends on it!

Ephesians boldly announces that many of us were dead before we came to life in Christ! The writer was addressing persons in the first-generation Christian community in Ephesus who had grown up and been shaped by pagan Greco-Roman culture. They had been dead because their existence didn't transcend the physical limitations of their bodies. They followed a variety of gods and fed every imaginable human lust. Although it might look like they were living life to the fullest, they were indeed dead because they didn't know the One who had created them, who breathed life into them, and who was revealed in Jesus. They came fully to life as they accepted that their former ways were indeed death and as they accepted the gift of life in Christ. Their new life was evidenced in the "good works" of service toward others that replaced former habits of mere self-satisfaction. They were now alive in the way God had intended.

The images the writer of Ephesians used to describe dimensions of heaven and earth indicate a cosmology different from what we now understand. The writer referred to a "ruler of the power of the air," reflecting a belief that there were two realms -- earth, inhabited by people and heaven, inhabited by God. In between, a spirit (not God) was at work, enticing people to do things that would characterize them as "children of wrath."

Our understanding of the cosmos has changed a lot in 2000 years. Pictures of a vast universe, provided by the Hubble telescope, change our notions about "heavenly places." Yet we're still dramatically aware of forces and temptations that seem to have a deadly power all their own:

- the power and destruction of addiction,
- the seduction of advertising,

- the ease of over-consumption, fed by a desire to get the latest and the very best--the highest resolution
- the temptation of individualism, to create our own rules in isolation of our tradition and community,
- the lure of instant gratification: “if it feels good, do it”
- the unrelenting demand of a 24-7 culture
- the confrontational nature of public discourse that demonizes the other
- the insidiousness of dissatisfaction and complaining.

As long as any of these temptations has an upper hand in our lives, we're dead, says the writer of Ephesians. We're filling our lives with something other than what brings deep joy and contributes to the community.

Most of the things I listed are characteristics of our modern world. But the last one, satisfaction and complaining, is both modern and ancient. We encounter it every day and find its roots in our most ancient human stories, such as this morning's reading from Numbers. In the Sabbath Economics class last Sunday, we talked about the transformation that began when the Hebrew people left Egypt and entered the desert. Although, as slaves, they had had no control over their lives, they were slaves in an affluent, imperial system that at least provided food. While the wilderness experience opened an opportunity for greater agency, it demanded a new form of trust in the face of scarcity. Since these folks didn't necessarily have an image of “greener pastures”--they hadn't yet caught a vision for the “promised land”--the security of their former life, even brutal slavery, sounded good. So they complained.

This wasn't the first time they complained, but the complaining was different on this occasion. Previously they had complained about Moses and Aaron, but this time they upped the ante, complaining about Moses and God. The complaining brought snakes--poisonous snakes. And isn't that what complaining always does--poisons the atmosphere and closes down possibilities and options?

Realizing they had sinned, the people asked Moses to pray for them. What was their prayer? Probably not so different than many of our prayers when we find ourselves in a jam. The need was obvious: Take away the snakes!

But God seldom answers with quick fixes. God's ways usually provide the opportunity for reflection and for trusting, for dying to one reality and finding life in a new reality. The story says that God directed Moses to make an image of a serpent that could be raised up for people to look at if they were bitten. By doing so, by looking at an image of that which they feared most, they would be healed. A modern parallel would be the way that immunology now uses serums of the same composition as a disease or virus to fight an infectious agent. <sup>1</sup>Seldom in life do we have the opportunity to simply escape from situations that oppress us, that cause us --sometimes rightly so!--to complain. But God invites us to look directly into that which we fear and dislike

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<sup>1</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *The Anchor Bible: Numbers 21-36*. Doubleday, 2000 (89).

and at the same time directly at the crucified Christ, the greatest demonstration of God's love for us. The cross is a reminder and assurance that God is with us and wants to see us fully alive.

The reading from the Gospel of John this morning comes at the conclusion of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. You'll recall that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, signifying that he was afraid to be seen with Jesus, but also that he was "in the dark"--he didn't understand who and what Jesus was about. He couldn't understand when Jesus talked about new birth--about finding new life in God.

This passage, early in the gospel, is already anticipating Jesus' death. And the message is clear: Jesus will die in order to give life. Jesus came not to condemn but to save. "Coming to the light" and "living in the light" in the language of the fourth gospel are ways of looking at the serpent, looking at the cross, and facing the darkness, the pain, the poison within us. We do so in order to let die whatever it is that keeps us from the fullness of life, whether it's our whole life that we haven't yet given to Christ, or a particular sin or a fear that has crept in and beleaguers us or keeps us from moving in a new direction.

Either way, the invitation from God is the same: "remember that you are dust and come to me because I made the dust and I will remake you for good works!" Let us accept our limits and let go of whatever holds and keeps us in the darkness.

I invite us to pause for a moment for reflection to consider if there is something dead within us that we're ready to bring into the light, ready to have die so we can live more fully. Then as we sing the next hymn, any who would like to receive oil, as a symbol of healing of looking to the cross, may come forward.

Let us pray:

Spirit of God, your power alone can lead us from death to life.

Hover over the chaos of our lives and create a new moment for each of us in which we hear your call to live again.

Fill us with the breath of life when we are immersed in human heart and cosmic pain.

Then raise us in joy to proclaim our new life in you. Amen.

*-Adapted from An Iona Prayer Book*