

Sunday March 14, 2021 – Easter Hill United Methodist Church

**Bible Study – Numbers 21:4-9
“Look Up and Live”**

Open with a word of prayer

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes) In pairs or groups of three, have participants share their responses to the question, “Are you fond of snakes? Why or why not?”

Numbers 21:4-9 Context. The fourth book of the Pentateuch (“five books”) is generally called “Numbers” in Christian tradition, but the Hebrew text names it “In the Wilderness” from its opening words. Both titles reflect the focus of this part of the Torah. On the one hand, we read near the beginning of the book a census of the generation that had departed Egypt and would die in the wilderness; and near the end, a second census enumerating the generation that had been born in the wilderness that would enter the Promised Land. The former generation was constantly rebelling against God and Moses, wishing to return to Egypt. This week’s reading is the last of the stories of the “murmuring in the wilderness.” In the run-up to it we learn that the old generation and its leadership had nearly passed: Moses’ sister Miriam had died some time before, and his brother Aaron, just recently at Mount Hor in the wilderness. Moses alone remained to lead the people, although his own rebellion against God (Numbers 20) meant that even he would not enter the Promised Land. As the Israelites made their way to the land of Canaan, the Edomites had blocked their passage and they were forced to double back, a circumstance that prompted their present complaining. God sent serpents to punish them. In Hebrew the “poisonous” serpents are literally “fiery:” seraphim – the same word used to describe the fiery creatures that mark God’s presence in the Temple (Isaiah 6). They can both harm and heal, as the current story suggests.

Read Number 21:4-9

What touches your heart, what do you hear in the scripture, what questions do you have, or what doesn’t make sense to you in the story?

Write down your thoughts or share your thoughts with the person or group you are with.

Read Numbers 21:4-9 again. Also read John 3:14-21 and Isaiah 52:13-15

Some reflection questions – Write down your thoughts or share your thoughts with the person or group you are with.

- In Numbers 21:8, we see the common belief that looking upon an image of something would be protection against that thing. [1] In this story, we see that looking on the image of the snake would bring healing. What do we learn about the people in this story? How are we like the people in this story?

- Earlier in the John passage, Jesus and Nicodemus have an exchange that includes the word play of being “born again.” Here, the word play is about being lifted up, clearly echoing back to the story from Numbers. How is God’s gift of Jesus like the image of the serpent?
- What themes are common in both the Numbers story and the John passage?
- The Romans believed their gruesome method of execution by crucifixion was a way of shaming those who came against their authority. Those dying by crucifixion were exposed (physically and metaphorically) and humiliated for all to see. (Those dying on a crucifix were nailed to a Roman cross and were at eye level of people passing by.) How does this idea of Jesus being lifted up on a cross get flipped upside down to being a method of exaltation, especially in light of Isaiah 52:13-15?
- How are you experiencing a renewed call for repentance and the receiving of healing and new life by focusing on Jesus during Lent?

Closing Reflection Question

How is this scripture calling you to change, to see, to be or what might it be calling you to do?

Prayer (10 minutes). Each person prays sharing their answer the following statements:

I ask God for....

I thank God for.....

Sending Forth (2 minutes). After all, have shared, pray the closing prayer. Ask for a volunteer to lead the group or read the following prayer in unison:

God of crucifixion and Resurrection, we are in awe of the depths of your love, that you would go to such an extent to reveal your grace and mercy for the world. As we rend our hearts and as we “look up” to the symbol of Jesus’ cross, may we understand the reminders of your abundant and life-giving love. Empower us to extend your love to all we encounter this week. **Amen.**

And now we pray The Lord’s Prayer....

Our Father who art in Heaven

hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,

on earth as it is in Heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Lead us not into temptation

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power

and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.