

**Sermon: 2021/03/14 (4th Sunday in Lent, Year B) -
*Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3,17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10;
John 3:14-21_BTR***

[Invite children to the front]

Kids' Talk: "Hide & Seek"

What sorts of games do you like to play with your friends?

[Wait for response.]

What about..."hide and seek"?
Do you know that one?
That was one of my favourites!
But these days I find I'm not very good at it!
Can you tell why?

[Wait for response.]

Right!
I'm tall - *and I don't bend well.*
Not anymore.
(So I find it very hard to squeeze into the best hiding-places.)

Well, Jesus in *John's* gospel today observed - that means, described something
He could see, which is that people often do bad things - steal and cheat and bully,
and then hide the truth that they did those things, which is *another* bad thing.

1+1=2.

And you and I might find ourselves in situations where we've not only done
something that we shouldn't have done, but try and hide the fact of our doing it
too.

I think we need to pray -
Let's pray:
Father God, ... In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

The Half-Full Glass

You know the story:

You could almost recite it in your sleep -

The Hebrews escaped from (New Kingdom[n.1]) Egypt (thanks to a series of merciful Heaven-sent miracles); they were then guided by God to return to their ancestral homeland, 'Canaan'; but, along the way, repeatedly ran into various kinds of discomfort or danger, and *immediately* began to loudly complain about the fact.

- and they didn't just complain against the imperfect leadership of Moses, a stutterer [see: Ex. 4:10, 6:12,30];

a self-doubting and flawed man, but to complain against *the LORD* (Himself).

And so He penalized them -

with disease [Num. 14:37 and 16:46-50];

with bush-fires [Num. 11:1];

with a "pin-point"-accurate, localized earthquake [Num. 16:31-33];

by withdrawing His protective hand and allowing their caravan to be raided by other tribes [Num. 14:45];

by combusting some in flames [Num. 16:35]; and so on and so on.

And, each time, thanks to these punitive "catalytic interventions," the Hebrews remembered (again) how good and faithful God is, and they repent, allowing the journey to continue.

It's like a "broken record!" (This section of their history.)

The needle "skipping" over some imperfection in the disc's surface, repeating a lyric over and over again.

And the problem - my "diagnosis" - is that, for the Hebrews, the "glass" was always only "half-full."

And it'd be easy to critique them for that, right?

- Because the help God extended them was *pure* selflessness.

We take it for granted that He responded to rescue the Hebrews.

But we shouldn't:

After all, ask yourself: 'What benefit was it to Him?'

(Getting involved in that ancient situation.)

To which one might reply: "To have some more worshippers."

- to which I would say: "So what?!"

Yes, the Hebrews - under God's instruction, institute a system of regular and frequent animal-sacrifice during the wilderness wanderings.

But why?

Was it *really* for Him?

Because the creator (of everything) who 'is Spirit' [see Jn. 4:24] is a carnivore?

A BBQ enthusiast?

No, what we hear is that - and I quote the Psalmist: 'I don't need your sacrifices of flesh and blood. What I want from you is your true thanks; I want your promises

fulfilled.' [50:13-15, T. L. B.]

And did He get their 'thanks'?

Barely any.

- *which He had to know in advance!*

(Being an omniscient (all-knowing) God.)

So, in other words, not only did God not *gain* anything by reacting to the Hebrews' plight of enslavement by the Pharaohs

- it was a raw, concentrated act of compassion borne of a love for humankind, He could see *too* that He wasn't even going to enjoy the unalloyed *future* gratitude of those He was *about* to help;

He could *foresee* that they were going to repay Him with a great deal of whingeing, whining and distrust.

But, evidently, God wasn't dissuaded - because doing the right thing is its own reward when you '[are] Love' [see: 1 Jn. 4:8b], and He "double-downs," adding more and more kindness to the already stark imbalance of it between Himself and the Hebrews, giving them supernatural food in the form of "manna," a pillar of fire to follow, and opening up rocks for them to drink when they were thirsty.

Yet, still, as I've reminded you, the pattern of "misfortune, complaint, relief then repentance" emerged, becoming, dare I say it, one of *the* dominant themes of the Bible's earliest texts.

So, as I said, against that background of God's generous provision and care for them, nonetheless the Hebrews seemed to have had a *really* BIG problem with the "glass" being (only) "half-full."

And I know that is a tired, worn-out cliché.

But it speaks clearly to a problem that effects many of us.

That "many of us" struggle with -

Is that true for you?

It's true for me.

Oh boy, you better believe it.

"Many of us" fixate on what we think is missing in a "picture"; in our homes; in a church; in what we own; *in our lives*, so that we're almost *totally* blinded to the reality of how richly blessed we actually are.

We receive, out-of-the-blue, an unexpected inheritance from a wealthy spinster aunt and we don't think: "Well *that's* a lovely surprise!"

Rather, we mutter and grumble about why our grandparents didn't have more kids. We manage to convince - *or dupe* - another person into marrying us; into making a lifelong commitment, "for better or for worse, in sickness and in health," and then we go and spy on our old high-school girlfriend on Facebook.

We live in the safest, free-est, most prosperous nation on the planet *and in the history of our species(!)* - most of us by just an accident of birth, and then we find *a thousand* things to protest and "cancel."

And the truth is: we're sick.

We're just as sick as the Hebrews.

(Not literally but *spiritually*.)

Even when everything is going great we manage to spot what's out-of-place, and we obsess over it.

Over tiny flaws and specks and anything less than perfection.

And it makes us sad and mad.

Isn't that your impression of America right now?

"Sad and mad."

Because we see the "glass" as only half-full.

It is the 'log' in our *national* eye [see Mt. 7:3-4], which explains so much, whether 1619 projects or whatever.

It is the poisonous snake biting the country's heel and the "heel" of our souls.

But just as the Hebrews 'cried out to the Lord in their trouble' [Ps. 107:19], we can too.

Ask Him to help you see how *enormously* good He has been *to you*.

Ask Him to 'show [you] the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Ask Him to help you obsess about *that*.

Footnotes:

1. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Kingdom_of_Egypt