

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Wilderness First Aid”

Rev. Ben Garris

Numbers 21:4-9

March 24, 2024 | 8:45 a.m.

Today we are finishing our Wilderness Stories sermon series in the book of Numbers, Bar Mid Bar in Hebrew or in English, “In the Wilderness.”

Numbers 21:4-9.

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom, but the people became discouraged on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole, and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Take a moment to think about what is your go-to complaint? What is the topic/situation/scenario/ or person you find yourself grumbling about the most often? What are you quick to complain about? Take a moment to think about that. If you’ve been noticing each week of our wilderness journey, the people grumble and complain and wish they had died in Egypt. This week is no different, but I’ll say this: the discomfort and difficulty of wilderness living tends to lend itself to grumbling and complaining. Add to that the reality that Israel is backtracking to avoid Edom, making their journey longer and their time in the wilderness longer, and the complaining gets turned up.

There are numerous TV shows on how to survive in the wilderness. Bear Grylls’ *Man vs. Wild*, *Survivor* (on its 46th season. 2/year), *Naked & Afraid* (because surviving in the wilderness isn’t hard enough), *Life below Zero* (sure, sign me up for -60 degree days) and one of my particular favorites called *Alone*. (No cameras or crew. You film yourself and are all by yourself other than medical checks that legally have to be made; you have to figure it all out and outlast others). Famous movies about surviving in the wilderness include *Cast Away* with Tom Hanks (“Wilson!”) or *The Revenant* with Leo Decaprio, and true stories like *Everest* or *127 Hours* (hint: always take your pocketknife with you). We are fascinated with how people survive (or don’t) in these wilderness climates. If you have seen any of these wilderness competition shows, you know a

reality you can expect to find in each one of them: that moment where the wanderlust of adventure wears off, and is replaced with doubts, worry, anxiety, fear, and inevitably complaining.

When the bugs start biting, when the sun scorches your skin, when your feet blister, when food and clean water become scarce, when you're soggy and wet or can't sleep, or you're cold, or even yes, wild animals like snakes or bears pose a dangerous threat, or you get sick from something you ate or water that wasn't properly treated then the harvest is ripe for the picking of any number of complaints. (I know I'm convincing many of you to join our annual camping trip this fall, aren't I?)

The shift that takes place in every show, and in nearly every contestant, is when the first complaint comes. The contestant you thought was the strongest and most skilled is now infected with a complaint. A complaint multiplies to another and then another. The mindset to win and outlast has been compromised and is replaced with the innate desire to leave the wilderness and rejoin the comfort of society again. The contestant taps out. They don't win. Or in the real-life stories, they don't always survive.

In **Numbers 14**, where we began this wilderness journey, we heard the first complaint and the start of the infection, or shall I say the initial snake bite: *Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. 2 And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! 3 Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" 4 So they said to one another, "Let us choose a captain and go back to Egypt."*

The anxiety of complaining enters the bloodstream and spreads, and we heard the complaint of Korah and his rebels against Moses and Aaron in **Numbers 16:3** *"You have gone too far! All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. So why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?"* and Dathan's complaint in **v.13** *"Is it too little that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness, that you must also lord it over us?"*

We heard a warning from the LORD, a tourniquet attempting to stop the poison from spreading further, in **Numbers 17:10** *And the Lord said to Moses, "Put back the staff of Aaron before the covenant, to be kept as a warning to rebels, so that you may make an end of their complaints against me, or else they will die."*

Last week we noticed the tourniquet failed and infection still spread in **Numbers 20:3** *The people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had died when our kindred died before*

the LORD! ⁴ Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here?

And now it culminates in **Numbers 21:5** *The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”* **Anxiety expressed in the form of complaining is an infection that can quickly spread and sabotage the life God has for you.** The infection of their first complaint has spread throughout the whole body now. Death is imminent if an antidote isn't received soon. God's wonderful provision of manna, the heavenly bread that was keeping them alive, has now become detestable in the eyes of Israel. Then sure enough, venomous snakes with a deadly venom that felt like fire in their veins, have overrun the people of Israel (they are in the wilderness after all) and they are dying. **They need first aid.** When poison enters your bloodstream you need intervention, fast!

My first assignment as a Navy Chaplain was to the United States Coast Guard. One of the things I got to witness many times was when they performed “helo ops” or helicopter operations. I would be on a boat below with other “Coasties” and a helicopter would meet up with us flying overhead. They would then practice different routines of the rescue swimmer entering the water, jumping from the helicopter, being lowered on a harness, being lowered to the boat even. Different scenarios to rescue people from different life-threatening and dangerous situations. The motto of the Coast Guard is *Semper Paratus*, “Always Prepared.” When a mariner is in a life-threatening situation they want to be rescued and they need saving FAST! Whenever mariners looked to the helicopter overhead, they knew that rescue was on the way.

The good news is that God never stopped loving Israel and that God sent Israel immediate first aid. The antidote to the deadly snake bites was provided by God in an unusual way. Looking to a bronze snake on a pole wouldn't do a snake bite victim any good today, but that's what it took for Israel. The metal snake had to be looked at and the bread from heaven had to be eaten to survive. Put their focus and trust back on God and his provision of grace and mercy, and they would survive the snake bites. **Jesus applied this same image to everyone when he said to Nicodemus,** *“And 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. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*

Why are we so interested in these wilderness shows? Are we just curious how we might survive in these wilderness stories? Or is there some part of us that subconsciously admits we are in the wilderness too, a wilderness of our own making. The Bible says we are lost in darkness. Lost in sin, infected by a deadly poison and we need rescuing, we need first aid. **It seems odd to look at a snake on a pole. It also seems odd to look to Jesus crucified on a cross,** but in doing so, we fix our eyes not on the complaints of our wilderness experience but on God, his sovereignty, his

power and provision, his love, and his grace, and the result not only gets us to live another day but gets us living in the Kingdom of God.

There are wilderness symptoms all around us today: anxiety, alcoholism/addiction, depression, identity confusion, and struggling to find your purpose. Those might be obvious examples, but even the gifts of God can be so covered in complaints they resemble a wilderness more than a gift. Have you ever grumbled so much that you now detest a blessing God has given you? Maybe you've seen the paradise of a marriage compromised by a habit of complaining about the spouse, and before you know it, what was God's blessing has become a barren wilderness of pain and contempt. I began by asking you: Where are you prone or quick to complain about? I'll say this, injustice requires that we complain about it and work to change it, but there is a difference between complaining about injustice and complaining about the provision and blessings from God. Do you complain about your family dynamics? Finances? Something here at Church? The sermon? Whatever it is, be warned, you might build a habit that can infect your whole well-being with disease.

This Palm Sunday we remember how the crowds of Jesus day hailed him as King upon his triumphal entry into Jerusalem as he rode in on a donkey. Yet all it took was the continuous complaints from the Pharisees (fellow teachers of God's law) to spread throughout and infect the crowd, so that just a few days later they would shout, "*crucify him.*" Sounds a lot like, "*we detest this heavenly bread!*"

Friends, may we be a people with grateful hearts. May we look to Jesus, the image of God's love for the world, and believe and receive the first aid God has for us who are dying in the wilderness. There are friends and neighbors who are in the wilderness right now crying out, "**I can't live like this anymore!**" They need help and they need it fast. As fellow snake-bitten people, may we point to Jesus lifted high on the cross that others might look to Jesus and experience life and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, leaving the wilderness and entering the Kingdom of God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.