

Main Idea: In the midst of Lent, we should become aware of the depth of our sinfulness, but that awareness should be coupled with the awareness of God's provision to restore us.

Even the best of us lose it every once and a while. That maybe what you are discovering this Lenten season. This season of introspection, particularly this far into it, you begin to realize how far you still have to go. You focus on your disciplines; you consider your sinfulness and come to grips with your sometimes woeful attempts at discipleship. Sin is real and when we take time to intentionally reflect on your sinfulness, you realize that even the best of us, those of us who do really try, lose it every once and a while.

Have you discovered a time or situation that is particularly trying for you? Several of us were playing a game the other night, it is game where all the participants try and figure out what best describes another player or perhaps another players actions. We had a lot of fun, but there was a question that caught my attention as I was reflecting on this text this past week. The question asked what would so and so do if they got cut off while driving? It's a good question isn't it? One I probably wouldn't won't others answering about what I would do.

It reminded me of an incident that happened here in Birmingham several years ago. It became a classic example of road rage gone too far. You may remember it. Shirley Henson was a legal assistant who worked downtown. She got off work and headed home in the sometimes frustrating afternoon commute on 65 south. According to reports, Henson got close enough to irritate the Gina Foster, who drove the car in front. This is how it happened according to Henson's own words:

I guess she was mad because I was a car length behind her. I turned on my high beams for a second, and she was shooting the bird. I thought, you know, she's crazy; she wants me to hit her car.

At this point, Foster stopped the car on the exit ramp and got out of the car. Henson described it this way:

I don't remember thinking anything except that she was coming at me. She was screaming, she was furious. I looked up, and she was there; her face was in the window. She was so mad. She said, 'You need to quit riding somebody's (expletive), you (expletive, expletive). She kind of leaned back for a second and

then thrust her head toward me, lunged at me. She spit on my face. And the next thing I knew the gun went off. It just popped, then she was gone.”

What a sad story. You go to work in the morning and before you get home you have killed someone and your life changed forever. Even the best of us lose it sometimes, even if we find that to be extreme. Perhaps it is the precariousness of driving that sets us off so quickly on the road, but my guess is that driving demonstrates our real impatience. A slow driver holds us up, delays our arrival at our destination. Or perhaps it is a feeling of injustice that someone cuts us off, advancing at our expense. But clearly, we may find ourselves reacting more harshly than what would normally become us when something interferes with our journey.

When I read the scripture lesson for this morning from Numbers, a strange lesson I might add, I think of road rage. Because it seems that the Israelites were suffering a bit of it themselves. Now from the time that Israelites left the Mount where they received the law that Mike spoke to us about last week, they have had a tough time. The responsibility of being the elected people of God proved to be a burden that they too often didn't want to live up to. It got so bad that generation of people were prohibited from entering the Promised Land by God. By the time we get to the book of Numbers, the biblical version of a census, we have that first generation of Israelites fading off the scene. They had wandered in the desert for 40 years and as this second generation came onto the scene the Israelites were ready to take the land that was promised.

Now according to our text, at this point in the story they were at Mount Hor and most direct way to reach the land of milk and honey was to go through the country of Edom. But Edom refused passageway. The Israelite attempted it anyhow but the armies of Edom pushed them back. So the only way to their destination was to go all the way around. That would be much worse than getting to Shelby County on 65 south on Friday afternoon. So they set out, and it is often the case with humans when things don't go right, they begin to get nostalgic for the past.

Have you ever noticed that? How people romanticize the past? You “remember the good old days.” Well apparently that is a common human tendency. Because Israel's

¹ As reported by CBS news on 48 hours in 2000. Quotes came from a www.cbsnews.com story dated 11/14/2000.

journey had become difficult, things had not worked out like they wanted; they begin to actually think that their time in slavery was better than what they were experiencing now. And of course they blamed everybody but themselves. In verse five we read, ***“they spoke against God and against Moses and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food.”*** That last reference most likely referring to the manna. That provision of God that saved their lives was now boring and old. They would rather be back in Egypt than to have to spend another day eating manna! They have reached the point of road rage and have lost all rationality.

Well if you are familiar with the biblical narrative of the Israelites, you know that this was not an unfamiliar pattern. However, unlike other occasions, the bible tells us that God, probably fatigued by their fickleness, sends serpents among them. The bite was lethal and many Israelites died. Enough so that the collective conscious of the people was pricked and they do what they have done so many times in the past. They confess. They go to Moses and say, ***“We have sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.*** (v. 7).

Now despite the frequency that we find Israel in this situation, I believe this pattern is still instructive for us, because, the issue of confession is important, particularly in a season we are becoming acutely aware of our sin. In order for us to get the full formative effect of Lent, we must reach a point of confession. Because it in confession that we are able to accept what may otherwise seem outrageous to our sensibilities. In confession, we admit that we indeed are not God, though we live our lives like we are. Remember what 1 John tells us, ***“If we confess our sins...”*** (1:9). In confession we realize that we need forgiveness of sin, and before that point, I don't think we really believe it. If we are to experience the grace and provision of restoration that God provides, then we must find a way to enter into confession. It is not so much confessing to a pastor or to an accountability group or to one that has been harmed, though that may be appropriate at times, but it is certainly reaching a point where you individually call out to God, and say God, “I blew it.” “I have spoken against you with the actions of my life; I have harmed your good name.”

When you reach a point of confession, you become honest before God. And God appreciates that honesty far more than our religious exercises and rituals. He wants you to take responsibility and confess. And here's the thing. Honest confession has an effect on God.

We see this effect again in our scripture lesson. Moses goes and prays to God on behalf of the people. He confesses their sin and God hears that confession. So he instructs Moses to make a bronze serpent, put it on a staff and raise it up. When the people are bitten, they are instructed to look up at the bronze serpent and if they do, they will live.

Now I admit that this is a strange account. It sounds cultic, superstitious, and magical. And I admit that I don't understand all of it. We know that it was common in ancient days to believe that the image of a danger could protect one from that danger. We also know that serpents were associated often with healing. If you have ever looked at for example the Medical community standard, you will notice the presence of snakes. So some speculate that the Israelites were to have an image of a serpent to protect them from the serpent, only that is not the case in our text. This serpent on a pole does not protect them from the serpent, they still get bit. They prayed that God would remove the serpents, but God does not, he only provides restoration for those who get bit.

So what does all that mean for us in our enlightened age? We are not supposed to go back to lucky charms are we, though they can be magically delicious. I would say a couple of things in addition to our need for confession.

We learn that God's grace calls for us to do the ridiculous. To embrace that which can not be understood. When I was studying this I wrote in my notes, why didn't God just get rid of the serpents. Why go through all the trouble. But there, to me, is an element of faith expressed. You didn't have to look at the serpent if you got bit, but if you wanted to be restored you did. In other words, while it may seem ridiculous, by embracing the raised up serpent you acted in faith.

Clearly our faith, if you could remove yourself from it and attempt to be objective, seems a little unusual particularly, I would think, to outsiders. If I were to say what the most popular scripture of all time is, what do you think you would say? John 3:16? I think you are right. ***“For God so loved the world that He gave us His only***

begotten son that whosoever believeth in Him might not perish but have everlasting life.” You know what said that don’t you? Jesus said that, speaking about Himself. And as we heard earlier this morning right before He said that, He said to his seeker friend, Nicodemus, “*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, the Son of Man must be lifted up*” (John 3:14). We are to put our faith in a crucified God. That seems strange really if you are honest. Just as I would think some Israelites when they saw they loved ones dying from poisonous venom would think it would be strange to have to look at a snake on a pole. But that was God’s gift to them, God’s provision of restoration, and it required some faith to act upon it.

If we weary on our spiritual journey and we feel that spiritual road rage creeping in. The way we handle it, is to confess our sinfulness and with faith look to Christ. In doing so, we will find ourselves restored.

There is one final thing we should note. As I mentioned, God didn’t remove the serpents, just made a provision for them when they were bit. In Christ, God has made provision for us in dealing with our sin, but of course that does not mean the consequences of sin are removed. Sin is serious business folks, and it does have consequences. And while God’s grace is sufficient for forgiveness of sin, we still have to live with the scars. So we should not think that God’s provision of forgiveness and restoration is a license to do what we want. Because we will pay dearly for that kind of thinking.

“Re”storation formation says that we are spiritually formed when we consider the lengths to which God has gone to restore us, to bring spiritual healing. A healing that all of us need, because we do weary on the journey, we do fail. You have probably discovered if you have taken Lent seriously that even the best of us lose it from time to time. But friends, let me encourage you to not keep your head down. Look up. Christ has been raised up. God has done it again. While the best of us lose it, the worst of us can have it. The grace and forgiveness of God. Hallelujah, Amen!