



Waiting on a Healing  
March 11th, 2018,  
All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta  
Rev. Dr. Simon Mainwaring

# Waiting on a Healing



## The Collect

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

## First Reading Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Hor the Israelites set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient 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



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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.

### Epistle Reading Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved-- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

### Gospel John 3:14-21

Jesus said, "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.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

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Sunday afternoon, my daughter and I engaged in an afternoon's painting. Her's was a beautiful sunset, mine, not so much. It is one my ambitions for the next several years to learn how to paint. I love the idea of painting, and I really like the sensation of brushing color onto a canvas, but the result is sometimes a little painful to look at.



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Anyway, last Sunday afternoon I had happened to read ahead to this Sunday's scriptures and so as I pondered my masterpiece I had in my mind the image that the book of Numbers conjures for us of snake-bitten people sitting in the wilderness, waiting on a healing from the bronze serpent Moses had set before them on his pole. Inspired by a moment of creative zeal, I seized my paints and brushes and put form to what lay in my mind's eye. And then my wife, Monica, came home.

"What's this all about?", she asked peering over my still drying art and speaking in that tone that I have to say I have never found particularly encouraging of my nascent if not barely conceived artistic talent. Strike one. Strike two came with her follow up, "Kids, come here, can one of you tell me what daddy has drawn here, it's always so hard to tell'. Thankfully, because I had briefed her very thoroughly, my youngest was able to offer a faultless interpretation of the elegant dance of texture and color that lay before them, and I was able to give Monica a knowing look that said, "well if a seven year old can get it, then I am afraid I just can't help you"; or something to that effect.

In my wife's defense, not only is it true that my artwork verges on the wrong side of incoherent, there is also a deeper question at work here given what my subject matter was and other such



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biblical passages like the one we heard from Numbers this morning. What is this all about, this story of snakes sent from God to bite his people, all because they complained about the food and the painfully long journey in the wilderness-walk out of bondage in Egypt. Better to die than to go on such a mundane diet, is something you and I might hear every other week, but it normally doesn't result in divine retribution.

So, what sort of story is this? An admonition against challenging the divine? An object lesson on the power of leadership and the even greater power of mercy? Well, as I painted the scene and as I reflected on all that my mind's eye imagined, it I couldn't but help myself from wanting to dwell with the bitten of Israel, those who sat in the shadow of a bronze serpent, gazing into the middle distance, longing for redemption.

I think that I found myself there, dwelling in my mind with the stricken, because I have been there before myself. I have dwelt in that space of unknowing, waiting on a healing. Perhaps you have too. Waiting on healing and hope is of course a profoundly Lenten discipline. If we take the gift of this season for all that it offers itself as, then these forty wilderness days have within them gifts



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of insight as do the other wilderness places of our lives. For me, one of my most treasured such gifts was not one that I found in a church but in a life that taught me deep and painful lessons of what it can mean to wait on hope and healing even in the most arid of wilderness places.

I first met Sandy when she was 14 years old. A beautiful, and radiant young woman; a Latina, surrounded by a large and exuberant family; and possessing a savvy manner and insight that seemed old for her years. There was a reason for that: Sandy was dying of cancer.

I came to know her during a year I spent working as a hospital chaplain resident on a pediatric unit in San Francisco. There are few more challenging places that I have practiced ministry than in the pediatric medical units of that hospital. I have known, since then, what it is like to stand on both sides of the line - as professional and as parent - and have learned how very little there is that can prepare you for either.

For Sandy the journey to the point where I met her had seen a gradual unfolding of pain as the dark shadow of cancer cast itself upon her life. Each day as I visited her room, without exception I would find Sandy's father, somewhat estranged from the rest of



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the family, yet resolute that he would wait, and watch, and hope for the light. For him, there was no other place to stand than in the thin space for hope that he had managed to cultivate for himself and for his daughter that meant for them that each day had a promise all of its own, a way for light to sneak in by the back door. He waited on that healing, day after day. At first there was dismissal by the rest of the family. Then there was anger. Then, it became clear that the healing this father was waiting for was not truly of his daughter's cancer, but of his relationships with a family that their daughter needed above all else, simply to be a family; her family.

At the heart of this play of humanity rediscovering itself in these adults' lives, was Sandy. I have rarely seen in my life more dignity and depth and keen perception of the nature of being human than I witnessed in her. Somehow, by a sheer miracle of grace, that 14 year old girl had the capacity to hold that family's messiness and profound insecurities with a stillness and an honesty and a love that remained, throughout, an almost mystical gift. The reaching out of a hand, the flash of a smile, the sweet gentleness of her voice. I knew, as I waited and watched and hoped that I was in the presence of something more than met the eye, and I was blessed. On her 15th birthday, her quinceañera in her Mexican tradition, the family, at last finding grace enough to be one body, met



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around her bedside with balloons, traditional music playing, a beautiful dress for Sandy to wear, and a room so often struggling for hope, filled with the light of human kindness. It was as if they had finally arrived at a place they had so struggled to find, and there was, at last, peace.

The next day I came, Sandy's courageous battle with cancer had ended; she had died peacefully in her sleep in the night. By the time I had arrived on the unit, the cleaning staff were already preparing the room for the next occupant. I found nothing of Sandy there, except for the light that was streaming in through the window from between the trees outside. I asked the cleaner for a moment, and took it upon myself to gather some of the nurses, an imagery arts practitioner, and the social worker, and we made a circle in the room around what had been Sandy's bed. We held hands and stood in silence, somehow hoping to remember and bear witness to a life that had graced us all.

'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'. What does it mean, do you think, to love an entire world? What does it mean to love so completely that even the darkest corners of our grief and our loss, our enmity and isolation might see light? What does it mean never to give up on the hope of healing for a world





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so thoroughly well-versed in the practice of condemnation and discord?

I think it means that you and I have our own places to wait, and watch, and long for a healing that may never come to the bodies and material struggles of those around us, but wait, and watch, and hope we must, because it is in that profound perseverance of the life of the faithful that the reconciliation of God enters the world. As John's gospel reminds us, Jesus has already decisively acted in the world that God seeks to reconcile to Godself; the opportunity now lies open for us to respond and to offer to others the same unqualified compassion, and undeterred faith, and deep capacity for grace that God extends toward us.

I wonder how long the men, women, and children sat in that wilderness place, waiting on a healing from Moses' bronze serpent. How long does it take for healing to fulfill its promise? Such mysteries are what we should expect to meet us on the Lenten journey. We don't get to call time on the eternal. We do get, though, to heal. You are not alone. Your God roams the wilderness, for you.