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Truth of a Story
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

While the pandemic has caused some of our favorite businesses to close either temporarily or permanently, and other things like worship services and meetings have changed to being on-line, there have been many new things that were created because of the pandemic. One of the new things I am enjoying is a podcast from actor and host of the PBS television program *Reading Rainbow* LaVar Burton called *LeVar Burton Reads*. It's not just for those of us who grew up watching his show about some of the best children's books, or fans of *Star Trek Generations* where he starred as Lt. LaForge, or those who know him from his incredible contribution to the original TV series *Roots*. His free podcast is an invitation for anyone to take a break from the stress of the day and listen to LaVar Burton read stories written by a variety of authors. The podcast has become popular, Burton believes, because people love stories and love to listen to stories. When it comes to conveying truth, stories can be one of the best conductors.

Like in today's Gospel, where Jesus' words and lesson are intended by the author of the Gospel according to John to be heard through two ancient stories about the poison of sin, the love of God, and can help us see what God has done to our sinful poison.

The first story Jesus referred to in today's Gospel is from the book Numbers in the Hebrew Bible. It's a story about the People of God and their difficulty adjusting to the freedom to live as God's People after living as enslaved people in Egypt for so many generations. Slavery is wrong for so many reasons; it robs everyone involved of the goodness of their humanity. Slavery dehumanizes the enslaved and makes monsters of those who delude themselves into thinking they could own, mistreat, and exploit a fellow human being, a fellow beloved child of God.

In the stories of God's People's transition from slavery into freedom, we can see slavery can do even more damage by how it poisoned people into believing they had been taken care of when they were enslaved. If you read the whole story in Exodus and Numbers, you'd read about how it hadn't taken long after the parting of the Red Sea before the people started to complain. Complaining can have a healthy place, but when it becomes someone's automatic response to anything new or different, complaining can be a poison that can hurt relationships and a person's growth. After the drama of the Red Sea, the Israelites followed Moses into the wilderness and they hadn't been there long before they started to

complain about all the walking, how scary the wilderness was, and how inferior the food tasted. They grew so nostalgic for the taste of cucumbers and melons that the bread of heaven they called manna had no flavor or substance. Their complaints showed while they had prayed for release from slavery, they had forgotten what oppression felt like, and revealed their trust was still in that oppressive and unjust system instead of the new life in God was giving them and Moses was leading them into.

As the story goes, the people complained and God responded by meeting their needs, but things didn't get better. At one point the People of God even refused to go into the Promised Land. They were too afraid. It didn't look anything like their lives in Egypt. It didn't look like whatever they imagined the promised land would like. As a consequence, the people had to wander for a generation, to have time to encounter God in the wilderness, to learn to trust God instead of fight God. That is where we find them in the reading from Numbers in the readings for today. The people of God had been wandering a long time in the wilderness. But instead of growing closer to God, they were growing impatient. And what do the impatient do? One thing they tend to do is complain, poisoning their situation even more with divisive thoughts and words. The people complained not just about the food and water, they complained against Moses, and even worse, they complained against God.

This is no small thing. In fact it takes us into another story, one of the very first. It takes us back to the Garden at the beginning when God asked the first man and the first woman about their actions concerning the forbidden fruit. Both the first man and woman answered God's question if they ate the fruit by blaming someone else. The woman blamed the serpent. Not to be outdone, the man blamed the woman God gave him, which is a pretty back handed way of blaming God. This blame seems to be the point where things changed in that story, causing God to send the two first people into the wilderness.

Several millennia and some epic stories later, God's People were back in the wilderness and still blaming God for the misery they brought on themselves by complaining and rebelling against God instead of trusting God. On this story, God again responded to being blamed. This time, according to the story, God sent serpents whose poisoned bites caused physical suffering and death.

At this point we need to remember something important about stories, especially ancient stories about the People of God. Many details in such stories are intended to point us to truths about people and God. Too often we can get caught up in the details by taking them literally instead of seeing what they point

to. For example, the detail of the serpents can make us think what kind of God sends serpents to terrorize and kill people? This interpretation misses the point. Perhaps the serpents were there in the wilderness all the time, both literally and figuratively. Perhaps the serpents are a reminder of the incident in the garden and a symbol of what the people had become: poison to each other by causing division and distrust in Moses and God, who once again was blamed instead of trusted.

Such division required healing, and the medicine was quite mysterious and strange. It was a pole with a serpent made of bronze the people had to look upon to be restored to life. This isn't a weird magic act, it's a story about the division sin created, and how God responded to this division by transforming it with God's love. Once the people looked on what they had become, God looked back with love that restored them to life and relationship with God, reminding them God created people to be in relationship.

It would be lovely if this story ended with "they lived happily ever after." But several millennia and epic stories later, we find in Jesus' time people were still inclined to impatience, complaining, blame and division. And in response, God, the author of John wrote, sent God's only Son so that the world would know God did not come into the world to condemn it but to save it. Jesus was lifted up on a cross and died, and God took that act, the worst people could do, and redeemed sin by turning it upside down and inside out, by taking death into God's own loving self and loving it into life, into resurrection life.

Several millennia later, we find ourselves in a world plagued by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has also brought to light so much human sin: impatience, division, trust in systems of oppression that continue to cause disparity, injustice, and in the case of the pandemic, more American deaths than World War II and World War I combined. Yet we do not have to entrust ourselves to living the same old never-ending story. Through Jesus' death and resurrection we can learn to recognize such sins and instead of ignoring them or blame others for them, we can choose to live resurrection life, we can choose to live the new story Jesus started. This still means responding to the pandemic with mask wearing, social distancing, and getting vaccinated when we can, and on another level, it means how we choose to move forward as we hear promises of a return to "normal". The stories of the Bible remind us "normal" isn't necessarily how we were created to by God to live. "Normal" seems to be marked by complaints and division, inequality, and selfishness. Perhaps the Gospel today is encouraging us to see beyond "normal" to the world as God dreams it can be. With so many changes happening right now, there must also certainly be opportunities for resurrection

life. Where we don't think of people who work any job be it professor or barista as a laborer to be exploited but a contributor to a greater cause; where education is about helping people discover how they learn, applying what they learn, and equipping them to see that education is a way of life instead of a piece of paper awarded for transactions made. Where success in business happens when everyone - all employees - profit, including the community, instead of a small group of investors and shareholders. Where opportunities aren't just for the few. A world where people of all walks of life can recognize sin for what it is when they look upon it: selfishness that cares nothing for anyone and when they recognize it choose to reject it for the love of God shown in Christ. Such a life may look different, it may not feel normal, and that is because it is better than normal, it's the love of God and the new story we can live every day and share with the world.