

Healing and Hope – Jake Buhler
(sermon preached at Osler Mennonite Church on April 25, 2021)
The sermon text begins on page 3

Numbers 21:4-9 NRSV. Story of the Bronze Serpent

⁴ From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea,^[a] to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 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." ⁶ Then the LORD sent poisonous^[b] serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷ 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. ⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous^[c] serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." ⁹ 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.



The Bronze Serpent by Fyodor Bruni, 1839

Luke 8:43-48 NRSV. Jesus Heals the Woman with a Hemorrhage

⁴³ Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians,⁴⁴ no one could cure her. ⁴⁴ She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. ⁴⁵ Then Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" When all denied it, Peter⁴⁶ said, "Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you." ⁴⁶ But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me." ⁴⁷ When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. ⁴⁸ He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."



Jesus heals the woman with a hemorrhage (from Wadi Ben-Hirki Foundation)

The Story of the Bronze Serpent (Numbers 21: 4-9)

Moses and his motley horde of Israelites are in the Negev Desert. Possibly two million of them. They are on their way to the Promised Land. But the Promised Land is no where to be found.

They had begun their journey in Egypt where they may have lived for hundreds of years. Egypt was a place where many oppressed peoples went for safety. You will recall that, much later, Jesus and his parents would also go to Egypt as refugees for two years to escape the tyranny of King Herod. Egypt was a thriving nation of academia, architecture and literature. It is where the Pharaohs built gigantic pyramids, and thriving cities.

When the descendants of Abraham and Sarah first arrived in Egypt, they were not a nationhood of people. They were a tribal people from Ur who landed up in Egypt wanting safety. Egypt offered the Abrahamic and Sarah people that safety. They lived in some comfort and were an important part of the Egyptian economy. As they grew in influence, the Egyptians felt threatened by them. They began a hate campaign that led eventually to oppression and finally slavery. Finally, under Moses the Liberator, helped along by the 10 plagues, Pharaoh sent them packing into the desert.

Through Moses, the Israelites had learned that Yahweh would lead them to a Promised Land where they would become a mighty nation. A dream perhaps, but it was worth hanging onto. The direct route from Egypt to Canaan is only about 250 miles. Make that a two- week journey if you were walking. That is where the Promised Land lay. But the Israelites ran into problems. It would take forty years and more than 1,300 miles of zigzagging, for that people to finally make it to Canaan.

Our story about Moses and the Bronze Snake happens during the 40 years in the wilderness. It is one of the weirdest stories in the Hebrew Scriptures. It happened near Mount Hor south of the Dead Sea. The Israelites had to detour around Edom which further delayed their journey to the Promised Land. They were tired of eating Manna and the few wild herbs they could forage in the countryside. So, they complained to Moses and to Yahweh. They said it would be better to return to Egypt where at least they had some decent food and places to sleep.

The storywriter says that the Lord is angered by the complaints and sent poisonous snakes to bite and kill a number of Israelites. The people are horrified and cry out to Moses. God tells Moses to erect a bronze snake and put it on a pole for all to see. If they look up at it, they will live. And those who look up at it are saved. This snake is later called Nehushtan.

The Israelites are miraculously saved from death. They are healed and hope returns. The Israelites become attached to Nehushtan and keep images of it which they worship. Later they are forced to destroy those images.

But the snake image remains with us. The snake wrapped around a wooden pole is the logo of the Canadian and the American Medical Associations today. The logo is a reminder of healing and of hope.

The Story of the Woman with the 12-year hemorrhage: (Luke 8:43-48)

We move to the New Testament text where there is an equally compelling, strange story.

A woman in the Capernaum region has a hemorrhagic condition. For 12 years she has not been able to touch people, or have intimate relations. She is an outcast. She has spent all her money on medicine and doctors to no avail. She is ritually unclean, as a result of hemorrhage; she represents the significance of the number twelve in Jewish tradition (the twelve years of hemorrhage) and is regarded, as addressed by Jesus, as “Daughter”. An act of touch heals this woman and gives her hope for a new life even as those surrounding her lack understanding.

From biblical times, the idea of having blood outside of the body has been considered unclean or dirty. It is unfortunate that the blood that is shed by women routinely for the sake of giving life has been shamed throughout history, while the blood shed by men in battle—in the act of taking life—is honored. This unnamed woman, whose story the text brings to light, not only suffered physical pain, but also emotional despair resulting from being stigmatized and isolated. Hers was a continual existence of pain and being cast out. Jesus meets her in this space—or, rather, is met by her—and does the opposite of what is expected. Instead of being repulsed or disgusted by her, he responds with compassion. He responds with

acceptance and grace. He responds with understanding. He calls her daughter. He offers her peace. With her gentle pull on the hem of Jesus' tunic, she experiences healing and hope.

Transitioning from the Scripture Texts to Healing and Hope in the times of Pandemics:

So, can we find healing and hope in times of pandemics?

For some of us, our grandparents and parents lived during the time of the Spanish flu which wreaked havoc in Canada and many parts of the world from 1918-1920.

The Great War (now called World War 1) ended in 1918. In that war, 66,000 Canadian soldiers died. Saskatchewan lost 6,600 soldiers. Worldwide, more than 17 million people died in WW1.

Spain was a neutral country in WW1 and was the only country that reported the horrors of the Flu openly. Other countries covered up the truth and accused Spain of starting the Flu. That was not the case, but the name stuck.

Soldiers returning to Canada and the USA, brought the Spanish Flu with them. It spread everywhere. There was no cure, but health officials, even at that time, knew about quarantining. Saskatoon at one point banned all public meetings, closed schools, cancelled church services and closed the city to tourists. In Canada there were 55,000 deaths between 1918-1920 out of a population of 8,500,000. Saskatchewan lost 5,000 people to the Spanish Flu out of a population of 750,000.

Information about how Mennonites suffered from the Spanish Flu in Saskatchewan and the prairies has benefited much from two recent publications. Dr. Vanessa Quiring published her research in 2016 on the effects of the Spanish Flu in Manitoba. Leonard Doell has just completed, this year, a major paper on the Spanish Flu and its impact on Saskatchewan Mennonites. In Manitoba, as in Canada, the average death rate was also 6/1000. But among Mennonites it was 13/1000. Why Mennonites were particularly hard hit – at more than twice the rate of non-

Mennonites – was because they tended to live in tight-knit communities with numerous social gatherings. The flu arrived in fall which was harvest season and also pig-butchering time. It was also the time to celebrate communion in church using a common cup. So, this made spread of the flu easier. But on the positive side it also meant people were able to help each other. There are stories of compassion, care, healing and hope as communities met their challenges together.

Leonard Doell (see *Hague- Osler Mennonite Reserve, 1895-1995, pp 333-338*) has collected the names of 130 Mennonites who died of the Spanish Flu in the Saskatchewan Valley region that includes the Mennonite Reserve north of Saskatoon. He says his list is not complete and the likely deaths in the entire area could be much higher (perhaps 200?). The Spanish Flu hit many young people – of the 130 persons who died in the Saskatchewan Valley, 108 were below the age of 30. Included in that number were young mothers and fathers, who died leaving small children behind. Most deaths occurred in homes.

As most of the deaths occurred in the fall, after the ground was frozen, digging graves was difficult. Leonard Doell records that in the village of Chortitz, Jacob Reddekopp and Peter Fast were buried in the same grave. And also, in Chortitz, Mrs. Heinrich Goertzen and Peter Reddekopp were buried in the same grave.

There were searches for home cures. Drinking brandy was tried as a remedy and its effect might have dulled pain but did not cure. Some tried taking red liniment every night. Another remedy that was commonly used was a mixture of onions cooked in milk, cooled somewhat, and then thickened by adding rye flour. It was spread between two cloths and applied as a hot poultice and placed on the sick person's chest. Few of these interventions were of much help. Some people wore masks.

Ministers spent much time visiting the sick and conducting funerals. Carpenters were kept busy making home-made coffins. Self-taught women known as Doodesbesorja (undertakers) washed the bodies and prepared them for burial.

Last week I went to visit Osterwick Cemetery a half mile east of Warman on the Ferry Road. It is where my brother Irvin Driedger's Great Grandfather, Peter Driedger, who died of the the Spanish Flu and was buried in 1919.

Spanish Flu in Ukraine (Soviet Union):

The Spanish Flu Pandemic went everywhere. In 1918 it struck the Mennonite villages in the Ukraine as well. My mother, Maria Pauls was 11 years old when it came to Grigorjewka Village. First, she lost her older sister. Then she lost her 6-month-old sister. Then she lost her mother. Ten days later she lost her father. Mother described her feelings of despair watching the elders of her village sell her house and all its belongings. Then being farmed out to different families, separated from her siblings. There was little healing and little hope.

The Current Pandemic:

In March of 2020, I was sitting in my normal place in the 3rd pew. This congregation met after the service to decide if we should curtail our services due to something called COVID19. I was certainly one who thought restricted actions were likely not necessary so early. The congregation thought otherwise and they were right. A week later various measures were taken by the health authorities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. We have not been the same since.

The COVID19 pandemic has affected our interpersonal relationships. The lockdown has reorganized our daily lives with more time spent at home, and less travel outside our homes. Digital devices have become more important and even tech idiots like me can manage a Zoom meeting. Indeed, the word "zoom" is now one of the most used word in the world. We have had to develop/create new ways in which to display and convey empathy and care.

My oldest brother died a few months ago. We could not attend a funeral because there was none. We survived because we learned a new science of empathy using technical devices. This human and device marriage is how I communicated with my niece and nephew. I could not see my brother during his illness or in a coffin. Instead, I collected photographs and composed a tribute transmitted electronically. I could not share tears nor could I hug those left behind.

This is an evolution in the concept of empathy defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. Social scientists and behavioral scientists, I am sure, will be studying how interpersonal relations were impacted by Covid-19 for years to come.

For children who now use so much of this new human-device method in their everyday lives, it may be the “new normal”. For me it is an aberration. But I am yesterday’s child.

Will we return some day to the old normal, or is that time gone? What was yesterday’s definition of affection, and what is it today when I cannot touch or embrace or hug. Does my boney elbow connecting to your boney elbow transmit many emotional synapses – any healing and hope?

I worry about the erosion of the need to fellowship together. I worry about those who may opt out of communal worship because with your computer cursor you can slide through a 50-minute worship service in less time – you can cut in and out.

Or perhaps I can take a totally different view of Church. Perhaps I can reconfigure my thinking and say that Church has partially left the building, but it has not left the fellowship or the congregation. I called a friend last week by telephone and told him I had washed and disinfected my hands and face so that no harm would come to him as we talked through the complex methods of physics and satellites. We must learn how to do church outside the building, but with a new empathy that uses electronic devices.

I think of our community in 3 ways:

First what are the physical ways in which COVID has affected us? It has killed nearly 500 people in Saskatchewan, not 5,000 as happened in 2018-19. If the rate of deaths per population was the same as hundred years ago, we could have seen a death toll of 9,000. But statistics is not our guide. The poor have suffered most in this pandemic. New immigrants have suffered. Single mothers with 4 children in a small house have suffered. Small businesses in the tourist sectors have suffered. Where is their healing and hope? I, as a senior living in a house, and not needing to

go out to a job site every day, have not suffered much. Although I wonder when my elbow hugs will turn into real hugs.

Second, mental health. Front line workers in hospitals and schools worry each morning when they go to work. My daughter, Elizabeth, who works in the COVID Unit at Saint Joseph's Hospital in Hamilton worries. She worries because a 35-year-old patient admitted on a Friday died on the next Monday. Front line workers in any service industry worry. It is more than a worry. It is the unknown X factor. Children absorb anxiety much more acutely than we think they do. Children are often the ones who are vulnerable especially when COVID has led to domestic violence.

Third, we may suffer spiritually. Our pastors may not be able to speak of these things because they are confidential. But we know that in our midst we ponder existential things that prick our very being. We ask "why" and there is no answer. Why does a loving God allow for a world-wide pandemic to happen?

In summary:

- To Moses and the Israelites, the Bronze Snake was a sign of hope. If you looked up and believed, you would live. And even today pharmacies and hospitals carry the snake encircled on a pole as their symbol of healing and hope.
- The unnamed woman whose act of touching Jesus' tunic experienced healing and hope. She identified where she could find her healing and hope.
- The Spanish Flu of just over a hundred years ago caused enormous death and suffering. We know what happened and that there was much trauma and sorrow everywhere, including in Mennonite communities. But we also have stories of how people rallied to help and care for each other. Stories of healing and hope.

- We remain in an emerging 3rd wave. There is still uncertainty. When will this all end? I have no answer. But I will quote a poem I wrote about my father's attitude in a time of drought

In 1961 there was little rain:
Sloughs dried up, ducklings died,
Topsoil blew away, cattle feed was scarce.
And father had the nerve to say that
Next year would be better.

Things will be better next year for we hope in God's healing.

Sources consulted: Bible (NRSV), Aliesha Riepma, Leonard Doell, Glen Klassen, Vanessa Quiring, Canadian Census Reports, Saskatchewan Archives, Maria Buhler Stories. NRSV of the Scriptures

