



**Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA**

**Rev. Scott E. Schul**

**4th Sunday in Lent: March 14, 2021**

**Sermon Title: “The Pandemic Road Less Traveled”**

**Sermon Text: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21**

The closing stanza of Robert Frost’s most famous poem reads as follows: “I shall be telling this with a sigh somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I - I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.” What is “the road less traveled by?” Well, there are lots of reasons why a road might become unpopular, unused, and untraveled. For today at least, I’ll define the “road less traveled by” as the road that is *slowest* at getting you to your destination.

After all, when I’m in my car, ready to go somewhere, and punch the destination into the map app on my phone, I *never* choose the slowest route if I have a range of options. I want to get where I’m going. For me, it’s usually about the *destination*, *not* the journey. If I end up taking the “scenic route” – the route that entails an extra half hour of driving – it’s only because I took a wrong turn and was too stubborn to backtrack.

Today, I don’t think I’m the only one who has grown impatient with a delayed journey. Today of all days, I don’t think I’m the only one who would do just about anything to avoid the “road less traveled by,” if that road delays me from getting where I want to be.

You see, *today* we stand at the threshold of a difficult anniversary. Tomorrow, March 15, will be the one-year anniversary of the last semi-normal Sunday we had here at Grace Lutheran Church, before the pandemic began to rampage through this region. I say “semi-normal,” because even though we held all four services, churches around us were closing, no one wanted to physically touch during the passing of the peace, and quite justifiably many of you stayed home, unsure what risks you might incur by being in a public place like a church.

What a year it has been. The pandemic has upended so many things that we knew, and so many things that we treasured. Nearly everyone’s life has been impacted. The pandemic robbed us of our ability to worship in our sanctuary, it robbed us of our ability to eat and sing together, and it robbed us even of the opportunity to gather for a proper sendoff for our loved ones who have passed into the heavenly realm.

Now don’t misunderstand – I have no regrets about the measures we have taken. As I said a year ago, I’ll say again now – we cannot assert that we are loving God if doing so puts our neighbor’s life at risk. Suspending in-person worship within our building, and finding new and creative ways to worship was and remains the right thing to do. But that doesn’t mean that any of us – *especially* your pastors – has to like it. Indeed, though we’ve rightly taken a “road less

traveled by,” I am *very* impatient for it to end so we, the Grace family, can be together again. I suspect you feel the same.

Today, holy scripture reminds us that we are not alone in our impatience. Moses had led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, and embarked on a journey that would eventually lead them to freedom in the Promised Land. You can imagine that once they escaped Pharaoh’s powerful army, the rest seemed easy. Just make your way across Sinai and into Canaan. Look it up on a map in a study Bible. It’s really not all that far. But *little did they know* that their path would be “the road less traveled by.” *Little did they know* when their journey began that it would take 40 painful years before it would conclude.

Today’s Old Testament lesson occurs in the midst of that journey. The people became impatient when Moses informed them that yet another detour and delay would be necessary. And so quite understandably they took their frustrations out on Moses and on God. “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.”

Just when they thought things couldn’t get worse, they got worse. *Much* worse. Poisonous snakes began biting the people, some fatally. Suddenly the people realized that all of their impatience and complaints had diverted them from fidelity to God as their first priority. And so with repentant hearts, they asked for Moses to intercede with God on their behalf, which he promptly did. In response, God told Moses to fashion a bronze serpent on a pole. Those who had been bitten were directed to look at the serpent and were promised that they would live.

This bizarre scene only makes sense when it’s interpreted for us by no less an authority than Jesus himself, in today’s Gospel lesson. The bronze serpent that healed the Israelites was a symbol of Jesus – the Son of God – who would likewise be lifted up on a pole – a cross – so “that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Now, I want to reiterate something Pastor Hetrick mentioned in her sermon last week. We have no basis to claim that God caused this pandemic to teach us a lesson. But as we have taken “the road less traveled by,” God *has* offered us an opportunity, just as God did with the Israelites, to draw something beneficial out of this journey.

For the Israelites, 40 years in the wilderness revealed every anxiety, fear, and idol that was drawing them away from God. Their “road less traveled by” broke them down, remade them, and reconnected them to God until, with renewed faithfulness, they were ready to enter the Promised Land. They’d continue to make their share of mistakes, but the Wilderness experience was one that would forever mark, define, and guide them.

As we at Grace prepare to mark the one-year anniversary of *our* journey on the “road less traveled by,” it’s an opportune time for us to consider how this experience has broken us down, remade us, and reconnected us to God. We dare not waste this opportunity to reflect, to learn, and to grow in faith.

During this pandemic, we, just like the Israelites, have all had our little negotiating sessions with God. “God, just let me have this ONE event at church, and I’ll leave you alone.” Or “God, I just want to hear the choir sing again, and then it’ll be fine.” Or “God, I’ll stop complaining if we can just have Christmas or Easter at the church like we did before.” Those are all worthy desires. But I wonder if God is telling us to put those wishes aside and instead focus our attention, our longings and our gaze on Christ, who was lifted up on the cross for us, that we might not perish but have eternal life. Can there be anything more important than that? I think that’s the question our Lord most wants us to ponder on this “road less traveled by” we find ourselves walking together.

The lesson of holy scripture is clear, and Luther captured it best when he wrote, “We must turn our eyes completely to that bronze serpent, Christ nailed to the cross... He is our Righteousness and Life...”<sup>1</sup> Friends, if that becomes our takeaway from this experience, then perhaps we will have harvested something truly worthy from it.

This pandemic won’t last forever. We’re not out of the woods yet, but the news keeps improving, and I’m confident that in some form or fashion we *will* be back in our building for worship later this year. When that happens, just like Robert Frost, we will eventually reflect back on this time, when two roads diverged in a wood, and we had to take the one less traveled by. And we will realize that it made all the difference. Amen.

Citations:

<sup>1</sup> LW 26: 166-167