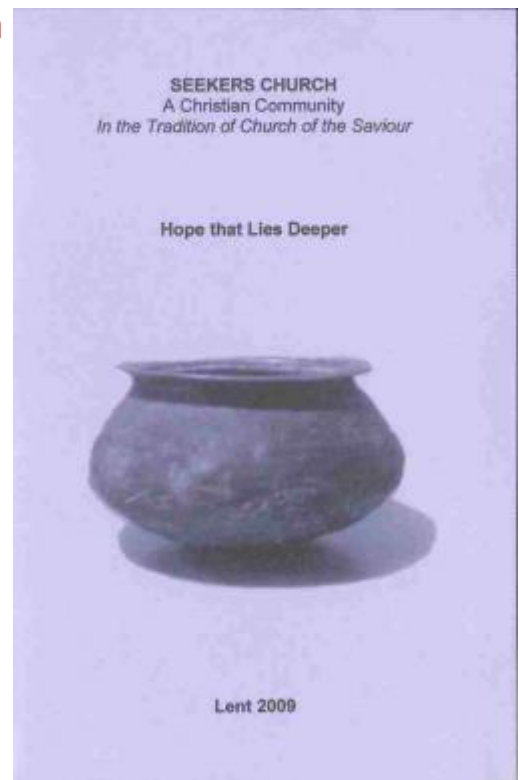


# "Saved in the Desert" by David W. Lloyd

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March 22, 2009, the fourth Sunday in Lent



Notice the key verbs in this week's selection from Psalm 107. These verbs – redeemed, delivered, and saved – are synonyms for the Hebrew Scriptures' concept of salvation. Also from the Hebrew Scriptures we have this strange story in the book of Numbers, about the people complaining to Moses as they journeyed in the desert wilderness across the land held by the Ammonites and towards the land of Edom, southeast of the Dead Sea, in what is now the Kingdom of Jordan. They have spent a

good bit of time at the oases at Kadesh but now he has led them away into the desert wilderness where there is no water. They moan and groan. They confront Moses demanding to know why they had to leave the Nile delta where water was plentiful and there was an abundance of food in variety. Whine, whine, whine. (Brenda Seat does a good imitation of how whiners sound.)

But to consider the Israelites in the desert wilderness as mere whiners is to look at the text with the eyes of a 21st century American who can get water by turning on the tap or buy opening the refrigerator door and pulling out a bottle or pitcher, and who can get tasty food delivered to one's door by either making a phone call or ordering through the internet. What was their experience in the desert like? In his book *Walking the Bible* Bruce Feiler describes it this way:

*First, you get thirsty. You wake up thinking about water. You go to bed thinking about water. You walk, talk, and eat thinking about water. You dream of water. You wonder, "Do I have enough water?" "Am I drinking enough water?" "Where is the water?" But you stay calm. You know water. You know how much water you need. Twelve liters a day. Or is that thirteen? And what if it's hot? Does that mean more? What if it's windy, does that mean less? Just drink. Drink when you're thirsty. Drink when you're not thirsty. Because "If you're thirsty, it's too late." And you're thirsty. So that's bad. But you know yourself. And you know water. So you tell yourself, "I can go longer than most people." But you're wrong. Everybody needs water. Needs it now. Go wandering in the desert for days, weeks, or forty years at a time, and water becomes the most important thing, the only thing. Water becomes life. Becomes salvation...*

*Next, you get hungry. And you stay hungry. Your first few days in the desert, you have remnants of the city, a bit of chocolate, a cookie, an apple. You eat these in diminishing*

proportions, and with increasing relish. You've outwitted the desert. You've brought the fleshpots with you. But then the desert wins. That piece of chocolate you've been saving melts. The cookie crumbles. The apple rots. You're left to the ground, which is a cruel resort. You're left to your provisions. You eat breakfast – bread, cheese, tuna, honey. You eat lunch – honey, tuna, cheese, bread. You eat dinner – the same. Traveling in the desert would be ideal for five-year-olds: Every meal you eat is identical. Inevitably, though, the routine tires. The sameness grates. It's then, as with water, that food becomes more. It becomes metaphor... Food, like water, becomes a way to salvation...

Finally, you get tired. You get tired of the heat. You get tired of the cold. But mostly you get tired of the sand. Sand is relentless. It goes through your shoes, through your socks, and lodges in between your toes. It seeps through your pants, through your underwear, and gloms on to places it ought never to see. It penetrates your windbreaker, gets under your shirt, and sticks to anything with hair. It infiltrates your food, sticks onto your teeth, and passes eventually into your stomach. And as a result, whenever you expel anything from your body, it comes with a blasting of sand. Sand in the desert is like rain in Britain: Sometimes it storms, sometimes it sprinkles, but most of the time it just hangs in the air and waits for you to walk into it. Thus, sand, like water and food, becomes cause for misery. And out of this agony comes meaning...

Spend enough time in the desert, and you begin to see that nothing is quite what it seems to be. Water becomes wisdom. Food becomes salvation. And sandstorms become poetry. Everything in other words, becomes grist for allegory. As Moses tells the Israelites near the end of their journey: "Remember the long way that the Lord your God has made you travel in the wilderness these past 40 years, that he might

*test you by hardships to learn what was in your hearts."*  
*Today, almost three thousand years since those words were written, the appeal of the desert remains the same. By its sheer demands – thirst, hunger, misery – it asks a simple question: "What is in your heart?" Or, put another way, "In what do you believe?"*

The people have been in the Wilderness a long time but did not yet have God in their heart. They did not yet believe in the God who will always be their liberator and sustainer. And so, in their thirst and hunger the people rebelled again against God and Moses, and as God had punished each previous rebellion – with a plague, with an earthquake, with slaughter – God punished this one by setting poisonous snakes on the people, killing some. Once again, the people came to their senses, repented, and asked Moses to intercede on their behalf so that God would remove the snakes. Once again Moses interceded and God responded. God instructed Moses to fashion a viper of metal and put it on a banner pole so that whoever had been bitten could look at the viper on the pole and would live. They were in an area where the ancient Egyptians and desert peoples mined copper so it could have been a brass serpent or a bronze serpent, but the Hebrew term is "nehash nehoshet" – a viper of copper. A person who was bitten had to ask himself/herself: "What is in my heart? In what do I believe?" If God was in his heart, if he believed in the God of Moses, the bitten person would look upon the copper viper and live.

A cobra on a staff was a symbol in ancient Egypt of the goddess, Wadjet. She was particularly worshipped in the Nile delta, from where Moses had liberated the Israelites, so this may have been familiar to them. Among other things she was the goddess of childbirth, and the warrior protector of kings, so that her likeness as a rearing cobra was depicted on the Pharaoh's headdress. Around the ancient Mediterranean snakes were venerated because they shed their skins and lived, a

symbol of resurrection or of eternal life. When they gazed at the copper viper the Israelites may have believed that through God's saving grace they would shed their sin of failing to trust in God, gain new life, and be protected from harm?

Thus the Israelites experienced salvation in the desert. It isn't clear whether the Israelites brought their copper viper on the banner pole with them as they continued through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. However, we know that in the 7th century BC, after the kingdom of Israel was destroyed by Assyria and the kingdom of Judah was threatened, the people were offering burnt sacrifices to this symbol. It no longer reminded them of the saving grace of the God of Israel but had become the image of another god, a violation of the Second Commandment. The great King Hezekiah destroyed these pagan poles with metal snakes in his great reformation to bring the people back to faith in the God of Israel, as described in II Kings 18:4.

This week's portion of John's account of the Good News begins midway in a conversation Jesus is having with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus has come to Jesus at night, as if he is hungry to know more of Jesus but is afraid of what his peers will think if they find out. He acknowledges that Jesus must be a teacher sent by God or else he wouldn't be able to perform the signs and miracles. Jesus replies, "Unless a person has been born again, the person won't be able to see the kingdom of God." This could be viewed as an encouraging invitation to Nicodemus – "Are you having a change of heart?" or as a sad criticism – "If only you would have a change of heart." It's an invitation to Nicodemus to declare himself as a follower. But Nicodemus won't commit to Jesus. Instead he sidesteps the opportunity to commit by asking how a rebirth is possible. Jesus explains about spiritual rebirth, and then asks, somewhat in exasperation, maybe more to himself than to Nicodemus, "If you won't believe me when I talk about normal earthly things, how

can you believe me when I talk about heaven?" The lection picks up the conversation as Jesus says, "The Son of Man must be lifted up like Moses lifted up the copper viper on the pole, so that everyone who has faith in him may have eternal life in the Son of Man."

I mentioned that the viper on a staff was an Egyptian symbol. But it was also known in Greek mythology as the rod of Asclepius, the son of Apollo and a gifted healer. It was a divine symbol of healing, now used by our contemporary medical professions. Jesus had some contact with Greek culture in Galilee, so maybe he knew about the rod of Asclepius. Maybe he was referring to his gift for healing.

Or maybe he knew the Romans would crucify him, that his death would be an atonement that saves us from sin. Maybe he meant that those who know that they believe in him – those who have God in their heart -can shed the skin of their sin, and be reborn as a snake is reborn, joyous with new life.

How is this joy possible? Because, as Jesus tells Nicodemus, God loved us, loves us, will love us. God didn't send Jesus to point out how many ways and how frequently we fail to measure up to his hopes for us. (Thanks be to God!) Rather, God sent Jesus to show us the way to live, how to remain attentive to God, how to stay utterly dependent on God. Those who remain attentive to God in Christ, stay utterly dependent on God in Christ have abundant joy and eternal life. If enough people remain attentive to Christ, staying utterly dependent upon Christ, the world can be saved.

But the sad truth is that although we are invited to live in this way, that we know we should do it, we don't do it. Or at least not all the time. Or at least I don't. Like you, I strive to follow Jesus, to make my life a psalm of love and praise and thanksgiving, to build community not just among my friends and acquaintances who think like me, but also with those who are very different from me. On occasion I even try

to love my enemies and build community with them. I do my best to follow my call and try to bring about the time of shalom here on earth. I believe in Christ, and yet, in truth I don't believe, not as attentively, dependently, wholeheartedly and deeply as I should. I'm uncomfortably like Nicodemus.

I'd like Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus to end right there. But it goes on and I get uncomfortable when I hear Jesus say, "The one who doesn't really believe in Christ, who doesn't really have God in his heart, the one who doesn't remain attentive to God in Christ, stay utterly dependent on God in Christ, has already been judged not to measure up. Some don't come into the light because they prefer that their evil deeds not be seen." Maybe this makes you squirm a bit, too. Except maybe Muriel Lipp, who is the most sinless person I know.

In his thoughtful sermon two weeks ago as he courageously took on the theological problem of theodicy Pat Conover asked: why does an all-powerful, all-loving God allow pain, suffering, death, and evil? Either God is not all-powerful or is not all-loving. Pat tried to dis-solve the dilemma of theodicy but it remains a real question for me. Why does a loving all-powerful God allow such pain and suffering and evil? I haven't yet gotten a satisfactory answer.

Two weeks ago I spent three days training a pool of investigators, social workers, physicians, and child care and youth program directors how to respond as a team to a case of child sexual abuse in a Defense Department child care center or youth program or school. Russ Strand, a law enforcement trainer, a really good friend and devoted Christian, was on the faculty. We talked about God's gifts of sexual orientation, and sexual attraction, and choice that harms others. Neither of us understands why God gave some men and even some women the gift of sexual orientation to peers but allows them to choose to molest children, why God gave some men the gift of sexual orientation to children, a gift they do

not want and cannot seem to stop themselves from acting upon.

This Wednesday I went into the Pentagon, passing the exhibit, "Faces of the Fallen," portraits of American military men and women who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan. I see it frequently and it always pulls at my heart. I was on my way to attend the screening of a wonderful special Sesame Street show for military families about coping with the changes that come from a parent who returns from Iraq wounded – as an amputee, or with traumatic brain injury, or with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. I was glad the Pentagon auditorium was darkened, because I silently wept when I saw how those families were adjusting. I'm sure I wasn't alone. After that, as I went to another errand in the Pentagon, I once again passed the exhibit of artifacts rescued from the area hit by the airplane on September 11. For two months this winter I worked one corridor away from that area and I was both unproductive and was sick with a respiratory infection. A coincidence? Back at the office I picked up four fax notifications of fatalities related to child abuse or domestic violence in military families, and sat in grief for a moment. I cry much too easily. I am probably suffering from the vicarious trauma that one can get from repeated exposure to those suffering deep trauma. The people most at risk are first responders, emergency room physicians and nurses, therapists and clergy. Some of you may be at risk for it.

In an article, "Deserted Spaces," David Rensberger writes that we can open up our understanding of "desert" to include desolate places in our lives where there is isolation and a lack of resources rather than human companionship. For Rensberger our desolate places can be emotional deserts of disappointment with relationships, unfilled romantic longings, and memories of abuse. They can be bodily deserts due to illnesses, accidents, and age. They can be vocational deserts where we have no sense of what we are called to be, or hate our jobs, or are adrift because we can't get the job we know



we are supposed to have. They can be economic deserts of poverty or loss of economic security. They can be social deserts of exclusion or loneliness. They can be spiritual deserts, dark nights of the soul such as Mother Teresa suffered.

Rensberger points out that

*Sensing the divine presence when humbled before God is a great comfort; but it is not the end of the desert. The truth is that we must simply learn to live in the desert, must try to remain oriented toward God as we go on through the misery. The divine presence is not the way out of the desert, it is the way through the desert. Remain attentive to God, stay utterly dependent on God – this is the lesson of the desert; but it will not transport us away from the desert. The people of Israel had the tabernacle and the manna, the presence of God and sustenance of God, as they went through the wilderness; but they were still in the wilderness...*

The Israelites had confessed their sin of rebellion and asked Moses to plead with God to remove the vipers. Moses did but note that the text doesn't say that God removed the vipers, as they wanted, but only that if they were bitten they could still live. That is, salvation didn't end the challenges for them, there would be new trials and temptations, but deliverance was possible through faith.

Rensberger notes that

*For the manna of divine sustenance we have the Lord's Supper, we have the Bible, and we have other writings left behind by those who have preceded us on this path. For the tabernacle of divine presence we have prayer, and we have above all the certainty that Christ is with us and has led us into this way, which is his way. If we can remind ourselves that it is his desert, his shucking-off of anything that is not god,*

*then surely we can hope for this joy as well. Joy in the desert: it will happen, it does happen; but we are still in the desert.*

I'm in the desert, thirsty, hungry, and tired of all the sand, not understanding what it's all about, and the poisonous parts of life – pain, suffering, loneliness, pride, evil, and so on are still there, so I whine like those Israelites of old. (How do I sound, Brenda?). But in the midst of the desert, if I look up at Jesus – at the one who heals, at the man whose dying on the cross freed me from sin, if I keep my eyes on the prize, as the spiritual says – if I believe in him with my whole heart, live as freely as he did, depending on him, Jesus can save me. Can save you. Can save the world. We can be healed, can shed our sins and have abundant joy and eternal life. Here, in the midst of the desert.