

March 10, 2024 – Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21

There's a wonderful episode of Bluey that I was watching the other day. Bluey, if you're not familiar with it, is an animated show about a family of dogs, a mother, father, and their two young daughters. It's hilarious and heartwarming and squeaky clean. I highly recommend it.

Anyway, in this particular episode, the girls are upset with their father, because it feels like he is always bossing them around. Telling them what they can do and what they can't do and generally not letting them have any fun. And when their dad tries to explain that this is just what being a parent is sometimes, they tune him out and don't really listen.

So instead, he tries to show them. They get in the car and set the GPS to go somewhere. But instead of listening to the GPS, their dad goes in the opposite direction. It says to go straight and he turns left. It says to go left, and he goes right. The kids in the back are freaking out because he refuses to listen to the GPS. But he just echoes what they said to him, "The GPS is bossing me around. Why should I listen to it?"

Eventually, they are hopelessly lost and pull off the road. The girls convince their dad that just because someone is giving you instructions doesn't mean they're trying to boss you around. Sometimes you need to listen to instructions. Sometimes you need to obey instructions. They have learned their lesson. And when they get back in the car, this time their father follows all of the GPS's instructions and they arrive safely at their destination.

As God's people our lives are a journey. And, on many occasions, God is our GPS, telling us where we need to go. But our sinful nature isn't particularly good at listening. Our sinful nature wants to be in control. Our sinful nature tells us that our heavenly Father is just bossing us around. Our sinful nature tells us that God's way doesn't make any sense. And that can lead to some terrible consequences.

The ancient Israelites found that out on several occasions. Because it seemed like no matter what God told them to do, they would do the exact opposite. God told them that he would protect them from Pharaoh and free them from Egypt. But when the Israelites get to the Red Sea, they are convinced that Pharaoh's chariots are going to catch up to them and kill them all.

God told them that he would provide for all their needs in the wilderness. But the moment they run out of food or water, they lament that they had ever left Egypt and are convinced they're going to die in the wilderness. God told them to have no other God's before him. But even as he is giving the Ten Commandments to Moses, they are bowing down to a golden calf of their own construction.

They end up so hopelessly lost in their sinfulness, that God simply lets them wander the desert for 40 years. They aren't physically lost. But they are spiritually lost. Because they refuse to listen to their heavenly Father. To their GPS. And God will not bring them into the Promised Land until they learn to listen to his instructions. An entire generation would have to pass away before they even began to understand what it meant to fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

But God was faithful. After 40 years of waiting, they were finally on a new road. The road to Canaan. The Promised Land. The end of their journey. And only one thing stood in their way. The nation of Edom.

Now, Edom was kind of Israel's brother, in more ways than one. You see, while Israel was founded by Jacob, Edom was founded by Jacob's twin brother, Esau. That should have made them allies. Similar history. Similar culture. Similar religion. They both traced their heritage back to Abraham. And though Edom was not part of God's people, it seems like they should have been at least able to work together.

But, they were brothers. And, just like Jacob and Esau, they fought. A lot. Much of Israel's history is spent arguing with Edom. Fighting like brothers.

So here we have Israel, ready to be done with this 40 year seat in the time out chair that God has given them. Excited and encouraged to be finally entering the Promised Land. And they rush toward the southern border of Canaan. And there's just this little strip of Edom's land that separates them from Canaan. They get there and find the army of Edom waiting for them. Refusing to let them through their land.

And so now Israel has to go around. Miles and miles and miles around Edom, to enter Canaan from the east. And all of the progress that God has made with them over the last 40 years begins to slip away. They begin to act like children again. Complaining about God's Fatherly goodness. Refusing to follow his instructions.

*And 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 loathe this worthless food."*

The complaint is almost laughable when you read it. Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? Wait a second. You've been in the wilderness for over 40 years and you haven't died yet. Why would God let you die now?

Not to mention that second complaint. There's no bread. There's no water. And we detest this bread and water that God has provided day after day for our entire journey.

They have nothing to complain about. But they complain anyway. Because that's the sinful gut reaction of every person as frustration and impatience bog us down. When things don't go our way. When the journey of life seems longer and harder than we thought it would be. When God's simplest instructions suddenly feel like a burden. When we forget all the blessings God has poured out on us day after day.

Instead of remembering all of God's promises and all of God's faithfulness, we blame God for everything. We blame the giver of every good gift we have for the one gift we didn't get. We selfishly and arrogantly demand that God be our vending machine of blessings. We decide that God is just a big bully, bossing us around. And that we would be far better off making our own decisions.

We act like children throwing a temper tantrum. And som, in the case of the Israelites, God does what any good parent would do: he punishes them. He sent snakes into their midst. Fiery serpents with a deadly bite. And the people panic. They beg Moses to intercede for them. Beg God to take these snakes away. And Moses does so.

But God doesn't take the snakes away. Not because he wants the people to die, but because he wants to teach them a lesson from this ordeal. So, instead, he tells Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole, that whoever looks at it might be healed and live.

And I can imagine what they were thinking. "You want us to look at a metal snake? After being bitten by a bunch of poisonous snakes, you want us to ignore our wounds, go find this lovely sculpture of the thing that just fatally wounded us, stare at it, and hope that the God who sent these snakes in the first place decides to heal us now. Right. That makes sense."

It's a tougher request than it seems. God, their GPS, has told them to spiritually go in a direction that seems absurd. To ignore what their sinful heart and sinful mind tell them is best. To let God be God and do what God does: boss them around. In faith that he will do for them now what he has done for the last 40 years. Save them from destruction.

It's a tough request. And Jesus uses it as a symbol of what faith in Him means as well. "*And 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.*"

OK. Makes sense. The parallels seem pretty obvious. The Israelites were poisoned by snakes. Humanity is poisoned by sin. The Israelites looked at the bronze serpent on a pole and lived. Humanity looks at Jesus on the cross and lives. Pretty straightforward.

But it's a harder concept than we realize. And Jesus spells it out even clearer in the next verse. One of the most famous verses in the entire Bible. *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

Simple. Concise. Elegant. Right? Well, think about what that verse is saying for a second. God loved his children so much that he sent his most beloved child to be killed, that life will come to those who look at this child whom God loves as he hangs dead on a cross.

John 3:16 doesn't sound so simple anymore, does it? We're supposed to look to Christ hanging dead on a cross and believe that death gives us life. We're supposed to have faith that God would sacrifice his child to save his children. We're supposed to follow our divine GPS in the opposite direction from where our sinful heart wants to go.

It's a tough request. It's an impossible request, really. It defies all logic. It runs contrary to every intuition. But fortunately, we don't have to figure it out, because God already did it. It's already been done for us. You see, while we were dead in our transgressions, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ.

By baptism, our death is tied to Christ's death, and our life tied to Christ's life. Death is a horrible thing. It makes no sense. It never does. And yet, somehow, God defies all logic, runs contrary to every intuition, and takes this thing that we hate – death – and turns it into life.

He takes a bronze serpent, lifts it on a pole, and uses it to lift His people from death. He takes his Son, lifts Him on a cross, and uses Him to lift His people from death. He takes us, lifts us up on our cross, and then lifts us from the grave.

By grace you have been saved. And this is not of your own doing. It couldn't possibly be. It goes against everything in our sinful hearts and minds. But God, being rich in mercy, gives it to us as a gift anyway. He leads us to the death of his Son in order to give us life.

Because no matter how little sense he makes to us, God is never just bossing us around. He is a faithful and loving Father, who just wants what is best for his children. And if we believe that, then the best place we can be is listening to his instructions, following his GPS, and going exactly where he leads. Amen.