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Learning to See Numbers 21:9

In Shusako Endo's *Stained Glass Elegies*, there is a short story about a writer who takes a spiritual journey. Suguro travels by bus to the western edge of Kyushu Island which was the center of a Christian movement in the late 16th century. This area also became the focal point of the vicious repression of Christianity in the early part of the 17th century. There were thousands of Christians who bravely endured torture and death rather than renounce their faith. Suguro is a Christian who cannot understand these martyrs. He knows that he is too self centered to make any real sacrifice for his faith. The purpose of this journey is to follow the footsteps of an obscure Christian of that period, with whom he identifies. Kichijiro was a Christian who renounced his faith to save his life and those of his family. But he followed his friends as they were led through the "valley of hell" where for 30 days they were tortured by the boiling water of the hot springs. And he followed his friends on to the town of Shamabara where they were burned at the stake. Suguro imagines what it was like for this man to watch the martyrs suffer and die. When Suguro arrives at the execution ground he notices a dark patch of earth. As he examines the ground, he finds several charred stones buried beneath the black earth. He wonders if they came from the time of the martyrs' execution. He picks up one of them and places it in his pocket. As he walks away the charred rock becomes for him the symbol of a reality that he has not learned to see.

In the 21st chapter of the Book of Numbers, we find a bizarre story which speaks of the power of such a symbol. After escaping from Egypt, the Israelites find themselves wandering in the wilderness. Life in the wilderness is a difficult struggle. The farther the people move away from Egypt the more they forget the burden of abuse they suffered as slaves. They remember only the security of their former existence. Their romanticized memory leads them to resent their present situation. They quarrel among themselves. They accuse God of infidelity. They charge Moses with failure of leadership. Through all of these behaviors the people demonstrate that they are increasingly self centered and alienated from God. It is then that the Israelites discover that they are living in a snake pit. Suddenly their earlier complaints seem trivial indeed. Now they are overwhelmed by poisonous serpents. They realize that they have made a serious mistake in turning their backs on God. They repent and call to God for help. God responds to their cry for help in a surprising way. God does not remove the poisonous serpents. Neither does he rescue the people from the snake pit. Instead God commands Moses to construct a bronze replica of a poisonous serpent. Those who have been bitten by the poisonous creatures are to look upon the replica and remember God's love for them. As they do this they are restored to health. Their lives are re-centered as they learn to see in a new way.

This emphasis on learning to see was at the heart of the life of a 16th century French reformer named Bernard Palissy. Palissy was a product of the Renaissance. He was an accomplished geologist, chemist, agronomist, and philosopher. But he is chiefly remembered as a ceramic artist. He taught the artists of his time to see in a new way. He developed a new approach to ceramic art which totally revolutionized that field. The part of Palissy's life that is less well known is his role in introducing

church reform to the region of the Saintonge in Western France. He was one of a small group of reformers who challenged people to look at their faith in a new way. He taught people to look for the love of God in the narrative of scripture. In that act of seeing, their lives would be re-centered. Palissy's message was compelling. Saintonge became one of the strongest centers of the Reformed movement in France. It was in Saintonge that I found the villages where my ancestors served as pastors. Palissy understood full well the seriousness of the work that he had undertaken. He ended his life in the Bastille in 1590 where he was imprisoned for teaching people to see with new spiritual eyes.

In the third chapter of John's gospel Jesus speaks in similar terms. Nicodemus has come to visit him under the cover of darkness. Jesus responds to Nicodemus' questions by speaking of the new birth that re-centers our lives on God. Jesus recalls the ministry of Moses in the snake pit of the wilderness. When the symbol of their fear was lifted up, the people were challenged to see it in a different way. It became a symbol of God's love. Nicodemus is invited to recognize the same dynamic at work in Jesus Christ. When the good news of God's love is lifted up among us, it overcomes the fear which haunts our lives. That is the rebirth which Nicodemus is invited to experience.

Last week PBS aired a documentary about the internment camps in Arkansas where Japanese Americans were incarcerated during World War II. Some of the young men from the camps volunteered to serve in the 442nd combat battalion. This Japanese American unit won more battle decorations than any other unit of its size in World War II. Daniel Inouye, senator from Hawaii, served in that unit. He described the high level of distrust that existed between the Hawaiians and the mainlanders in the unit. Inouye and his friends called the mainlanders "katonks". He said they coined that term to express the sound the mainlanders made when they hit the ground after being struck by the Hawaiians. The bad blood between these two groups was so strong that their officers seriously considered recommending that the unit be disbanded.

But everything changed when the unit was taken to visit one of the camps in Arkansas where the mainlanders had lived. Inouye remembered that he couldn't believe what he was seeing as they drove into the camp. The sprawling buildings were surrounded by a high fence. Along the fence were a series of guard towers. In those towers were Caucasian soldiers with rifles watching everything that was going on. Inouye said that the Hawaiian soldiers got together to talk about what they had seen. They agreed that people who had come from a place like that and still wanted to serve their country had to be amazing human beings. Their eyes were opened. They had learned to see their fellow soldiers in a new way. There were no more problems after that. They had become brothers.

It is that kind of re-centering that Jesus invited Nicodemus to undergo. It can happen to us as we learn to see the love of God that has been lifted up in the wilderness where we live.