

Look with Eyes of Faith

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

(John 3:16) This is one of the verses we heard in our Gospel reading for today. It's been called the Gospel in a nutshell and is one of the most well-known verses of the New Testament. And yet, our Gospel reading for today is part of a larger discussion between Nicodemus and Jesus. The time when this leader of the Jewish High Council went under the cover of darkness to see Jesus because he didn't want to be seen doing so.

Unlike those who tried to trap Jesus in His own words as He grew in His popularity, Nicodemus wanted to understand Jesus. So, he begins with a compliment, saying, ***“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with Him.”*** (John 3:2) And yet he went on to ask Him how it was that someone could be born again, even when they were old. That's when Jesus shares with him that unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, they couldn't enter the kingdom of God. But this didn't make sense to Nicodemus. So, Nicodemus asks how could this be? That's when Jesus uses an example from the Old Testament in order for Nicodemus to understand.

If you recall from our Old Testament reading, He uses Numbers 21:4-9. A time when the Israelites became impatient when they walked through the desert. They started complaining, speaking out against Moses and God. ***“Why have you brought us out of***

Egypt only to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” (Numbers 21:4b-5)

That was when God decided that they would receive something in return for their grumbling and complaining. So, He sent venomous serpents among His people - many died as a result. Then, all of a sudden, that's when His people had a change of heart, saying to Moses, ***“We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that He would take the serpents away from us.”*** (Numbers 21:7) And so, after praying to God, Moses was instructed to, ***“...Make a fiery serpent and put it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”*** (Numbers 21:8) Moses did as he was instructed and when the people were bitten, those who looked up and saw the serpent, lived.

From our perspective, this doesn't make any logical sense. Why would you have someone who had been bitten by a snake look up at a snake on a pole again? So often we try to understand the things of God using our minds and simply need more explanation. The things we believe in and stand up for make sense to us, otherwise we don't believe in them. Otherwise, the best thing to do, like Nicodemus was trying to do, would be to ask questions so that you might understand better. However, having someone look at the snake that just bit them, that's more like having someone relive the trauma they just went through....and some today might even argue that you're inflicting more emotional trauma on the person. And yet, as the Scriptures tell us, those who looked up at the image that brought them death, and after seeing that serpent on the pole, and believing in God, they lived.

Jesus goes on to say to Nicodemus, ***“...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.”*** You see, Jesus knew that He would be taking the poison of our sins and the sins of the whole world upon Himself so that He might become

that venomous snake who would be lifted up. And for those who look and believe, not only are they be cured of their sins, but He also even makes it possible for them to have eternal life. Even in this world today, this is what we need – the antidote to the sin that plagues us. Like those out in the desert, too often, we grumble and complain ultimately against God and can find ourselves in need of salvation.

Plagued and bitten by the venomous snakes, the Israelites were told to look up to a venomous snake in order to be healed. And in love for them, God used the very thing that had cursed them in order to save them. And He does the same for us with Jesus on the cross. Out of His great love for us, He sends Jesus to the cross to die for all of our sins and the sins of the whole world. We might ask how can this be? But then again, who else can save us through the death of our Savior? Or who else can take the cross, that instrument that brought death, and use it as a means of our deliverance?

You know, Martin Luther once described this seemingly illogical way of God when he wrote the 28th Thesis of the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518. He wrote, ***“The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. [While] the love of man, comes into being, through that which is pleasing to it.”*** Meaning man finds but God is the one who creates – just like He did with the whole world.

Jesus shared this with Nicodemus that night when He asked Jesus how someone could be born again. Because only God can make it possible for us to enter in the Kingdom of God. Only God can bring about forgiveness and eternal salvation for us. And while the Law of God rightly condemns, only Jesus’ death on the cross, and His resurrection on Easter morning, make it possible for us to enter into eternal life.

Now, while Scripture tells us that Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of darkness, it's quite possible that he may have left enlightened. Because later in John's Gospel, Nicodemus would be the one who insisted that Jesus be allowed to have a trial when others wanted to outright condemn Him. (John 7:50) And in John's Gospel, after Jesus' death on the cross, Nicodemus went with Joseph of Arimathea to ensure that Jesus' body was taken down from the cross, anointed, and wrapped, and was placed in the tomb. (John 19:39) So did Nicodemus remain in darkness? And did he look to the cross and believe? Some would say that he was a saint, however, the Scriptures do not tell us, even though theologians have argued over it for centuries.

I want to remind you of something St. Paul wrote, ***"The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those of us who are being saved, it is the power of God."*** (1 Corinthians 1:18 NIV) There are times when we don't understand. It's during those times that we tend to grumble and complain because it doesn't make sense to us. Rather than confessing our sins, our sinful natures would have us remain in darkness, for fear of being judged. But God knows you better than you think. So, during this Lenten season, I'd like to encourage you to take the time to repent of your sins. If you can, try to grasp just how great your need for salvation really is. And as you do, don't forget to look up at the cross with eyes of faith, because it's there that God reveals His great love for you through His Son, our Lord, and Savior, Jesus Christ, that YOU might have Life in His name... ***"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not die but have eternal life."*** (John 3:16) And that includes YOU!

In Jesus' name, Amen.