

Sermon for March 19, 2017 "Look Up!"

Numbers 21:4-9
John 3:14-21

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." The Children of Israel were wandering in the desert. Now the desert is an awful place to wander. Some would say that there is not much in the desert. It is true there is not much water. There is also not much food. It might be more correct to say that there are a lot of things in the desert. There are a lot of prickly plants. There are a lot of snakes and scorpions. There are also a lot of vultures to remind you of what will happen if you don't get out. The weather is also not pleasant. It is burning hot in the daytime, and bitterly cold at night.

The Children of Israel had been in the desert for a while and there seemed to be no end in sight. Some began to complain. The Bible says, "They became impatient upon the way." And they began to say, "Moses, why did you bring us out of Egypt to die in this desert? There is no food or water out here. All we have to eat in this awful manna day after day. We roast in the day and freeze at night. And all for what? Some pie in the sky promised land."

The people complained too much, so God sent fiery serpents to plague the people. The serpents bit the people. And they cried out in pain. Some perished. Finally, some of them came to Moses and asked him to pray to God that this plague would end. It took a while, but they finally turned to God.

Now God's plan all along was to save the Children of Israel not to destroy them. After all God was leading them out of slavery at the time. God heard their cries of pain and it hurt God. Their Heavenly Father felt the fiery serpents just as they did. And God saw that they were turning back to their Lord. So the Gracious One in heaven heard Moses' prayer of supplication.

God decided to devise a way to save the Children of Israel from perishing without letting them forget the lesson they had learned. God said to Moses, "Make a bronze serpent. It will remind the people of their disobedience, but it will also be the means of their salvation. Then nail the bronze snake to a pole. Lift it high so that it can be seen from every part of the camp. When anyone is bitten by one of the serpents all they need to do is look up at the bronze serpent and they will be healed."

Moses did as God directed and the people were saved. But, I imagine there were a few stubborn people who didn't look up. The Bible doesn't tell us this, but human nature being what it is, it follows that some refused to obey God's directions. I imagine there were some who refused to look up and be saved. Because of their stubbornness they would not look to God for salvation. And they perished.

You know, the Children of God have always been in a wilderness. I'm not talking about the terrain in Israel and the Holy Land. I am talking about the spiritual surroundings in which the people of God live. This world is an awful place to wander spiritually. Often times it is hard to find spiritual food. The world knows nothing of the bread and water of life. And in this desert the nights are dark and as cold as a dead heart, and the days are as hot as the fires of Hell. On top of this there are many demons, which wait to sting and bite.

Many people perish because of these dangers. They perish in a wilderness of sin because they have no spiritual food or water. They are bit or stung by various desires. Some wander lost in the darkness and cold of night. Some swelter under the hellish heat of the day. Just look at the world around you! People are possessed by the demons of greed and lust. Many are possessed by the desire for drugs. People ignore those in need around them because they are chasing after the desires of the flesh. Many are lost in this wilderness of sin. All suffer in this spiritual desert, but many perish.

But God is not blind to what is happening. God sees, and God cares. God sees the perishing. God hears their cries of anguish. Our Heavenly Father even feels the pain of their suffering.

God loves the world and does not wish that any perish. So God decided to make a way of salvation for the people. But this situation was a lot bigger than that time in the desert. The scope of the problem was wider. It was not just a group of pilgrims in the wilderness. It was an entire world of people lost in sin. The cause of suffering was not just a few hundred snakes. It was all the demons and serpents of hell. Sin and death were devouring God's Children. The solution had to be a global one not just a local one. It had to heal the world of the effects of sin. It had to cure death itself and ensure eternal life.

So God went to work. Moses was not around, and anyway, this job was too big for him. First God took the sins of the world. The Almighty poured them out of an old dusty flask. Then God mixed them with the tears of a mother and a father. Then God called his son. And God poured the sins of the world upon him. And as if that were not enough, God took his only son and nailed him to a pole. Then God hoisted him up high for all to see. Choking back the tears God said, "Look at what I have done for you. Look upon the sins of the world poured on the only righteous person to ever live. Look upon your torment. Look upon death! Look, and be saved. And the light of Christ's death shone for the whole world to see.

But you know how human nature is. There were some stubborn people. They refused to look up. They would rather look down into the shadows and perish. They loved the darkness. And refused to accept the light. And they perished.

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the Son of Man be lifted up, for God loved the world so much that he gave his only son so that whoever trusts in him shall not perish but have eternal life. God sent his son to die, not to have an excuse to condemn the world, but that through his death the world might be saved. Those who look up to him for salvation will be saved. And those who don't look up to him will perish because they do not trust in God.

Through Christ the light of salvation has come into the world. But people loved the darkness because they were evil. And some refused to come to the light. But others came to the light and were saved.

Christ was lifted up for us. He bore our sins. He endured our punishment. And he died our death for us. What wondrous love is this that God sent his only son to die for us? So look upon the cross and see your suffering and shame. Look upon the cross and see the way that God saves you. Christ was lifted up for our salvation; look up to him to be saved and sanctified.