

“Look to Jesus in Faith”

Snakes. They fascinate some people, but others of you probably shuddered just to hear me say the word. They crawl along the ground, they slither out of or into places you least expect them, and, yes, some of them are quite dangerous. Not the sort of thing you'd want to display or set on a pedestal or show off. But you've already heard this morning about a bronze snake that was fashioned and put on display on a pole.

That account is from the history of the Old Testament Israelites. These chosen people of God had escaped by God's power from the land of Egypt, and were eventually on their way to the land God had promised to give them. On their way, they spent many years in the wilderness. Once again on this occasion, the people did what they seemed to do best. They complained. They complained about the food and the water that they did not have, and they even complained about the food that God was miraculously providing for them.

And that was unacceptable. These people had more reason than any other to trust God and to rely on him, to look to him in humility and faith, but they sinfully and selfishly grumbled and complained.

So God took action. He made it clear and plain that their grumbling was unacceptable. Into their camp came venomous snakes. People were bitten. Many people were dying. I'm not sure I can quite imagine the terror felt by those who saw it happen. But they finally understood. They turned to God through Moses his representative, and, confessing their sins, they begged God to take away the snakes.

And God offered a solution. He had Moses fashion a snake out of bronze, and put it up on a pole in the sight of the people. Anyone who was bitten could look at the snake and live. That simple act of looking at the snake was a testimony to their trust in the promise of God. The people as they looked to the snake were silently admitting their sinfulness and their absolute dependence on God.

That account from the history of the Israelites may or may not be familiar to you, but it was certainly familiar to Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a religious leader well versed in the Old Testament Scriptures. He came to Jesus one night to speak to him and learn from him. That night, Jesus spoke the words of our text, recorded in John chapter three. He told Nicodemus, **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”**

Jesus was teaching Nicodemus a lesson about faith. He was telling him how he might be saved. Just as The Old Testament Israelites looked to the snake, so Jesus invited Nicodemus as he invites us, to look to Jesus in faith. Jesus explains how in looking to him we see God's love and we see God's light.

The snake on its pole was a gracious gift of God. He had every right to punish the Israelites who insisted on grumbling and complaining, who refused to acknowledge his many blessings. But in his love, God healed and preserved them. In a similar way, Jesus would be lifted up on the cross as a gracious gift of God's love. Our stained glass windows on the North side of church remind us of these similarities between the bronze serpent on the pole and the lifting up of Jesus on the cross.

Jesus goes on to explain and to describe God's love with what is perhaps the most loved and best known passage in all of Scripture, John 3:16: ¹⁶ **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”** It is a passage so rich and full of meaning that many sermons could be written about it. Let's take a moment to consider some of its beautiful message.

“For God so loved the world.” This is the very reason and the only reason that Jesus came into the world to die. Because of God's love; because God loved the world so much. Jesus didn't come for fame or fortune. He came because he loved the world.

And why did God love the world? My confirmation students will tell you how often I ask them that question. Why does God love us? And I think they've figured out the answer. The answer is: there is no answer. God loves us because of who he is and because that is what God does. That's different from anything else we experience. If we love something, it's because of some quality in it. We love our parents because they take care of us. We love our friends because they are nice to us. We even love pizza or whatever our favorite food is because it tastes good to us. So what does God see in you? Nothing. Why does God love you? Not because of anything you've done. The things we've done deserve God's punishment. They are offensive to him. But God loves us anyway.

And not just us. God loves the world, a whole world of sinners. There are no exceptions. There are no exclusions. There is no one left out from hearing the amazing message of God's love: Jesus died for you. Jesus loved you enough to live perfectly in your place and to die because of your sins. ¹⁷ **“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”** ¹⁸ **Whoever believes in him is not condemned.** That message of God's love calls us, anyone, everyone to humbly believe what it promises. Look to Jesus in faith. See God's love.

Jesus goes on to explain to Nicodemus the difference between faith and unbelief. **“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”** ¹⁹ **This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.** ²⁰ **Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.** ²¹ **But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”**

The painful truth for those who reject God's message of salvation, for those who refuse to look to Jesus in faith, is that they stand condemned already because of their sins. While on earth, Jesus shared the light of the gospel, the truth of God's Word. But many refused to listen. We see again

and again in the Scriptures how people attacked and criticized Jesus. We see how they laughed at him and worked against him, while only a few followed him faithfully and worked alongside him. And things are no different today.

Those few are the ones God has called to faith, to whom he has revealed the light that is hidden from sinful people. Through faith their sins are washed away. By faith they recognize the truth and see the light, and in faith they live their lives.

People who hate the light love evil deeds. They don't want to hear about the things that they've done wrong, or the responsibilities they have toward others. They don't want to answer to God, and so they do their best to remain in the darkness.

But people who by God's grace look to Jesus in faith – these people love the light. Believers strive to live their lives according to God's Word. They want to show their love by loving others. They want to thank God by doing what he desires. And, as Jesus says, they do all these things through God. God gets the credit. As the Apostle Paul writes, **“it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose”** (Philippians 2:13).

We have come into God's house again this morning to see that light. It reveals our sinfulness, but it reveals even more brightly our Savior from sin. We have come to once again look on Jesus in faith and to learn from him. We have come to be strengthened by God's love to go out and share that love with others.

The bronze snake on its pole saved the Israelites from death for a time. They went on to live in the Promised Land, and then they died. Jesus compares his being lifted up on the cross to that snake, but in him we have an even greater deliverance. He has saved us from the poison of our sin and has given us eternal life. May God grant us his grace to look to Jesus in faith until the day when we see him and live with him forever in heaven, because God so loved the world.