

## **“Look Up and Live”**

A Sermon Preached by Young-Mee Park  
First United Methodist Church of Oak Park  
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*From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 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 detest this miserable food." Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. (Numbers 21:4-9)*

*And just 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. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." (John 3:14-21)*

We now stand at the midpoint of our journey. Three weeks have passed since Ash Wednesday, when we started the journey of self-examination and repentance. And we have three more weeks to go before Easter. Lent is longer than Advent, forty days compared to four weeks. We know that. But, halfway through, it feels particularly long, even dull and boring. I am not sure whether we have the same fresh and intense feelings of anticipation and hope that we had in the beginning of the journey three weeks ago.

Well, that is what happened to the Israelites in our first lesson today. It was with a great sense of excitement and anticipation that the people of Israel began their Exodus journey. With Moses at the helm, they had seen mighty hands of God at work in their behalf, to set them free, to protect them and provide for them, not just once, but many

times, repeatedly. I have no doubt that they were exhilarated to be on the road, the road to freedom and independence.

Yet, it did not take long for them to grow tired and weary. Soon, they became impatient, irritable, and cross. They began to gripe and grumble. They were not sure where they were going. They were not sure whether Moses knew what he was doing. Dissension grew in the ranks. In our first lesson today, we hear them speaking against Moses and against God: "*Why did you drag us out of Egypt? There is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food. We cannot stomach this stuff any longer.*"

Did you hear it? In the same verse, they complain about the lack of food, and then about the food they do have! Inconsistent, just like teenage children, aren't they? By this miserable food, the stuff they cannot stomach any longer, they mean the manna. You remember? When the people cried out to God for nourishment, God rained bread from heaven for them every day! Well, that was now a long time ago. They were tired, lost, and they had been eating this manna day after day. They are now telling God that they are sick of it, that they are sick and tired of God's grace! They think that Egypt was not that bad! They think that they had all-you-can-eat smorgasbord every night! Sometimes we do this, don't we? We remember a past that never really existed.

Eventually, God had enough of their whining. The story says that God sent a pack of poisonous serpents into the camps. They bit them, and many in their number died. Terrified, the people came to Moses, asking for forgiveness. Then, Moses prayed, and God told him to craft a bronze serpent and lift it high on a pole. Moses did this. And he ran through the camp, holding the flagpole aloft and calling out to the people in the throes of their agony, "*Look up! Look up and live! Look up! Look up and live!*"

The Bible says that those who did what Moses said, those who stopped looking down at the serpents, those who stopped trying to pull them off of themselves and their children, but looked up instead at the bronze serpent, those men and women did not die, but they were saved.

Today's Gospel lesson begins with a direct reference to this mysterious story. Jesus says, "*And just 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.*" Then, he continues: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.*" I can't think of any other better-known and better-loved verse than this one, John 3:16. If you grew up going to Sunday school, I am sure that you learned this verse even before you were able to read and write. If that is the case, good for you. This verse truly represents the gospel in a nutshell. We do well memorizing it and teaching our children to do the same. Yet, I think that we need to be careful not to present this verse as an easy ticket to heaven, without telling and teaching the whole story.

No, I do not think that this verse is the magic formula for entrance into heaven. No, I do not think that the bronze serpent in our first lesson is a wonder-drug, or a new medical procedure, which could cure any disease in the world. No, I do not think that the Son of Man lifted up on the cross is a Superman, or James Bond, with a bag full of tricks to save himself.

In our first lesson, the serpent is the very thing of which the people were afraid, the very thing that killed them. Yet, God takes the image of the very thing that kills them, uses it to ward off death and bring healing to the victims. The Son of Man lifted high on the cross in our Gospel is the most hopeless human being in creation, despised and forsaken by his friends, laughed at and ridiculed by his enemies, watched and speculated on by an apathetic and cynical public. Yet, it is through him and in him that God chose to save this world.

You see? The cure for a serpent is a serpent. The cure for human life is one man's life. The cure for death is death. We will be cured and saved, when we stop looking down at serpents that bite and poison us, but instead look up, face the very thing that kills us, and acknowledge from whence comes our help. We will be healed and made whole, when we stop looking down at our sin, when we stop looking down at the mess in which we put ourselves, but instead look up, face the most hopeless human being in creation on the cross. We will be given new life, when we turn our heads and look up, when we turn hearts toward the mercy and power of the Lord, the author and giver of life.

We are just like the Israelites in the wilderness, aren't we? We, too, are on a journey, a journey toward freedom and life abundant. Yet, we become impatient. We become irritable. We become cross. We are lost, tired, and weary. We whine and complain, and we look down. We are wounded by the haughty arrogance of pride and self-sufficiency. We are frustrated, feeling like victims of a world we cannot change. We grumble about the monotony of each day. We gripe about the complexities of human existence. We whine and complain, and we look down. We love darkness rather than light. We feed on forbidden fruit. We view our lives through a set of lies and false stories. We whine and complain, and we look down. And the deadly serpents bite us, poison us, and kill us.

The good news today is this – God loves the world. God loves the world so much that God will not let us look down and perish. God takes the image of the very thing that kills us and lifts it high on a cross. We just need to turn our eyes, stop looking down, but instead look up. We just need to turn our hearts toward the mercy and power of the Lord. Then, we will be awakened to a promise of new life. Then, we will be healed and transformed. Then, we will also be lifted up, so that people may see Christ in us, believe in Good News, and live. Thanks be to God!