

**“Rend Your Heart: Claiming the Promise, Look Up and Live” (14 March 2021)**  
**Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21**  
**A sermon by Rev. Bob Kells, based on material provided by**  
**UMC Discipleship Ministries**

This morning’s message is entitled, “Look Up and Live.” It is the fourth message in our Lenten series called “Rend Your Heart: Claiming the Promise.” To give credit where it is due, this series I am preaching is based on material provided by the UMC’s Discipleship Ministries program. That means some of the ideas and words come from this preaching resource, and some are my comments and examples. Before I get started, let’s pause for a moment of prayer...

**PRAYER:** Holy God, we thank you once again for this day and for this hour. In our worship of you, Holy One, we praise you and give you thanks for the life of your Son, Jesus Christ, and that you call us to walk in His footsteps. We thank you for your Holy Spirit, present with us. We come today thirsting for a word from You, and You have not disappointed us. Open our hearts and souls to hear what you would say to us this day. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

“Snakes! Why did it have to be snakes?” If you’re a fan of movies like me, you might recognize that line from the first of the Indiana Jones movies, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Even if you’re not a movie goer, you might have the same reaction to our scripture lesson for today—why snakes! Now, I know there are folks who keep snakes as pets and that’s all well and good. But snakes in the wild, poisonous snakes, like those in our lesson today, can be dangerous and deadly. In the story from the Book of Numbers, they are both dangerous and deadly. What’s going on with all these snakes? And why would Jesus bring it up again, hundreds of years later, in a nighttime conversation with a man named Nicodemus? Let’s start with the snakes.

We begin with the people of Israel wandering through the wilderness of the Sinai desert. They have become cranky, as they had on several previous occasions, and start to complain. Now, these is not your typical “are we there yet” cries of impatience. These complaints are about the lack of water, the lack of good food, and the lousy food—the manna from heaven—they’ve grow so tired of eating. In response to this murmuring, God allows poisonous snakes to come among the people of Israel and bite them and some of them died. They people then ask Moses to help them, to “pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” Moses did...and God told Moses to make a bronze serpent, place it on a pole, and tell the people who are bitten to look upon the serpent, and they would live. And so they did. The bronze serpent did its work, and the stricken people were healed when they looked up to it.

It seems kind of ironic, doesn’t it? You have to look upon a snake to be healed from snakebite? Then again, maybe it’s not so strange. After all, the antivenom we use to save the lives of people bitten by snakes comes from snakes themselves.

But what’s more interesting here is that God did not answer the prayer of the people they way they wanted it answered. Their prayer was to “take away the serpents from us.” God didn’t do that. God did not remove the threat of death from the people. Instead, God provided a way for them to be saved; they had only to look up to the bronze snake, and live.

Make no mistake: the snake on a pole was not magic; it did not have healing powers in and of itself. God provided the healing. The snake was simply a vehicle for the healing act of God, a prop, set in place to see who would have faith enough, and trust enough, to do what God commanded.

And so, God saved the lives of God's people in the wilderness. But that's not the end to the story of the bronze snake. Years later, about 500 years later, it turns up again in the time of King Hezekiah of Judah. Hezekiah was one of the good kings of the Jewish people. He wanted to do what was right and to follow in the way of David, to be a man after God's own heart. When he became king, Hezekiah swept away the pagan idols that had—once again—crept into the people's lives, along with anything else that might distract them from worshipping God. The bronze serpent from the time of Moses was one of those items. Apparently, it had become an object of worship itself, an obstacle to the worship of the One true God.

Let's remember, this is not the only time things have come to be respected or worshiped in place of God. The golden bull the Hebrew people made and worshiped not long after they left Egypt is just one such story of idol worship creeping into people's lives.

We can look around our world and see plenty of things that people turn to and worship instead of God in our day—power, money, self-satisfaction. But things cannot save us, and we cannot save ourselves. Only God can do that.

Now we come to Nicodemus but before we get into his encounter with Jesus, let's take a moment to remember who he was.

- Nicodemus was a leader of the Jewish people.
- He was a Pharisee, a group of Jews who practiced a very strict interpretation of the Law, and
- He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the council that governed Jewish faith and life.
- Clearly, Nicodemus was an important man; he was among the rulers of the Jewish people.

So, Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. He came with flattery: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God" (John 3:2). Jesus changed the subject and answered Nicodemus with a statement that, as we would say today, His conversation with Nicodemus might be put this way:

- Nicodemus, you need to become a different person to be part of what God is doing.
- This change is so drastic that you need to be born again (or born from above).
- What? Born again? Born from where? Wasn't being born the first time hard enough?
- It was hard, but this is harder. This time, you'll need to take a deep breath...a different kind of breath...you'll need to breathe in the Spirit instead of air...in addition to air.
- Once you do, you'll come to realize the life born from below here is shallow. It's not a bad life, slaving away all day, trying to find meaning in worldly success (and failure).
- But it could be so much more. God has so much more in mind for you...so much more for you to do that is good...so much more for you to be...and it all comes through the love of your creator who will fill you with an unbelievably beautiful vision for your life.
- If you want to be part of what God is doing now, you need to let go and let the Spirit lead you.



- Be born into a new way of seeing; let go of what was and grab hold of where God is calling you to go, who God is calling you to be.
- “Are you a teacher of Israel, [Nicodemus] and yet you do not understand these things?”

In this meeting by night, Jesus unfolded for Nicodemus a vision of God and humanity and community that rose above the brokenness of the world that is “born below.”



Jesus gave Nicodemus an awful lot to think about in that conversation. Did it make a difference? That’s hard to say. What we do know is the next time we hear about him, Nicodemus is defending Jesus—or at least the right for Jesus to be heard—before a hostile Sanhedrin bent on condemning him. “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?” the council said to Nicodemus.

And then, Nicodemus appears one more time in the darkness—the darkness of a Friday afternoon—along with another Pharisee named Joseph, to collect the body of Jesus. He brought a hundred pounds of spices to prepare the body of Jesus for burial, which sounds like way more than enough to do the job.

Or was there more to it than that? Was this Nicodemus’ penance for listening in the dark and failing to go out in the light of the new life Jesus spoke of? Or maybe Nicodemus discovered the courage or faith or desperation to look up and live.

That story from Numbers isn’t really about a snake, and it’s not about worshiping an idol.

- It’s about recognizing we need help.
- Admitting we need a savior because it is clear we cannot save ourselves.
- And it’s about obedience to the one who will rescue you from what’s killing you...if you just look up and live.

Jesus compared looking at the snake on a pole with the Son of Man being lifted up on a cross to make a point: The serpent and the cross are symbols that people look up to in order to see their salvation and the cure for sin.<sup>1</sup>

God didn’t take away those snakes in the desert the way the people wanted. The snakes were there, and so was the poison that could kill them. No, God doesn’t take the poison of sin out of our world. But God provides us the remedy, the way out, from the danger we face.

Odd as it seems, the cure for a snake is a snake;<sup>2</sup> the path to salvation leads through suffering; the way to life that truly is life goes through death, the death of the One man, Jesus Christ, who opened the doorway to life with God, eternal life for all. That doorway to healing and to life is open to us today. We have only to look up and live.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Homiletical Perspective,” in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Lent Through Eastertide*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 103.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Kocher, “Pastoral Perspective,” in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Lent Through Eastertide*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 102.