**LOOK UP**

**Numbers 21:4-9**

4 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.

 5 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."

 6 Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.

 7 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.

 8 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."

 9 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.

**Ephesians 2:1-10** (p.192)

You were dead through the trespasses and sins

 2 in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.

 3 All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us

 5 even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved--

 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

 7 so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--

 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

 10 For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

**Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 (p.559)**

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.

 2 Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those he redeemed from trouble

 3 and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

17 Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction;

 18 they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death.

 19 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress;

 20 he sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction.

 21 Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.

 22 And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices, and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

**John 3:14-21 (p.94)**

14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

 16 "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.

 17 "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.

 18 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.

 19 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.

 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

 21 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."

**SERMON – LOOK UP**

Today’s texts make God’s love for humanity explode like light from a supernova… and a little bit like a Sci-Fi movie. Maybe “Lost” will even be a good name. It all started with a burning bush, which did not burn out; then 10 plagues in Egypt, including water turning to blood, frogs everywhere, locusts, hail and finally all the oldest male children of humans and animals dying. A bunch of Hebrews fled for their lives while the sea split open, and then swallowing the Egyptians as it closed. There were clouds during the day, fire by night; manna falling from the sky and also birds, and water flowing out of rocks when they were beaten on. Can you see it?

And then, just for icing on the cake they keep going in circles in the wilderness… for forty years. They worship calves, complain, complain, complain…. Yet, God never gave up on them; he was always there. But they continued to complain. The same ol’ food every day… Complain, complain, complain. Until, finally, God had enough. He did everything for his people, led them out of slavery, fed them, loved them, and all they could do was turn their backs on him and complain. And so continues the movie – snakes appear everywhere – and not just any kind of snake, but poisonous ones, and they bite the people and the people die. So, by now you ask me, what love? I get it, sounds more vengeful than loving, doesn’t it?

Here’s the thing… the people realize that they are the ones on the wrong side of the story, and they go to Moses and ask him to pray. Tell God we are so sorry, they say; tell him we will never be this disobedient and unthankful again. Just let him take away the snakes!!!! And Moses prays, and God listens. He tells Moses to make a snake and put it on a stick. And Moses takes some bronze and beats it into a snake and put it on a stick. God says, if you look at the snake, you will be healed – your life will be saved. Bam, bam, bam… like nails going into a cross, Moses beats the bronze, until it looks like a serpent.

I can see Moses running around camp yelling, “Look up!!!, Look up!!!” If you look up, you won’t die. But, I also see the people being so worried about the snakes coming, looking at the bites, that it is hard to tear their eyes away and look up to the sky. We are like that, aren’t we? We are so afraid of what is going on around us that we can barely tear our eyes away from our own hurts; our own snakes… our own bites that we have to take care of before they get the best of us. So busy with all of it that we don’t look up…

And just as the snake was lifted up, so Jesus was lifted up on a cross, as we read in the gospel. We hear this as Jesus speaks to Nicodemus. Nicodemus, who has a position in the religious hierarchy, a Pharisee, who thinks he has it all figured out. But then he encounters Jesus. He was a likely onlooker when Jesus made a whip and drove all the merchants out of the Temple. He may have been among those who asked Jesus for a sign to justify his disruptive behavior.

But something about Jesus “hooks” him enough to make an under-cover visit to Jesus.  A visit in the dark of night – maybe so that no one else saw him, going to the disturber of peace, the radical who stands against everything he and his peers believe in. But he sees light - a light in the darkness - “What if this guy is really the Messiah…?” And Jesus tells Nicodemus that he has to be born again – born again of the Spirit. Nicodemus has a really hard time understanding all of this. But Jesus continues with his monologue and comes to what is arguably the most “famous” verse in the Bible. Martin Luther famously called it “the gospel in miniature,” indicating that it is the very heart of our Christian faith. We see it in sport stadiums, graffitied on bridges and buildings, everywhere… but unfortunately also used for judgement. It is the verse that most of us probably memorized as were children if we were going to church and Sunday school. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whosoever believe in him, will not perish, but have everlasting life.” When you think about it, God’s love for the world is nothing short of miraculous.

The point of the stories, after all, is that God is intent on providing healing for God’s people. God’s desire for healing persists not only when we are sick or broken because of circumstances beyond our control, but also in those times when our own choices have brought about what ails us. We see God’s bent toward healing in the other readings as well: *They cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress,*we read in the psalm;*he sent out his word and healed them*. And to his friends in the church at Ephesus, Paul writes, *God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ*.

But what a s*trange remedy* this is. Looking up, looking at the cross, turning to the light… In the midst of this, these passages bear witness to a God who ceaselessly, stubbornly works to make a path to wholeness for us. And sometimes the path to healing often unfolds by weird, inexplicable turns, as the snake bitten people of Israel discovered. This makes some kind of convoluted sense. Because the brokenness that besets us can take such strange forms—be it grief, illness, accident, or any of the other ways that life can unexpectedly and senselessly clobber us—it should perhaps come as no surprise that the means of our healing can take strange forms as well. Like through the brokenness of a man on a cross.

And we humans have continued to be such a rebellious bunch. We ignore God’s plan, we bargain with God’s commands and we fight against God’s justice – at least some of the time. Martin Luther once said, “If I were as our Lord God … and these vile people were as disobedient as they now are, I would knock the world in pieces.”

And you might think God would do just that – knock the world in pieces. Knock people who are truly loving the darkness, exploiting the poor, abusing the vulnerable, pushing aside the weak, ridiculing the different, laughing at those who suffer, into pieces. Knock war mongers in pieces. Knock human traffickers in pieces. Knock drug dealers, and maybe even sometimes us into pieces.

We also trespass against God, we commit offences, we sin. After all, who among us has not done what we ought not to have done, or left undone what we ought to have done? Who has not – from time to time – denied God’s goodness in others, in ourselves, or in the world around us? Judgement is something ***we*** do. Condemnation is something ***we*** do. To ourselves, and to others. We pretend they come from God. We fear they come from God, because we imagine that God hates us or, at best, tolerates us. But God… likes us. God actually likes us.

In the person of Jesus, we find a God who is not much interested in retributive justice. God loves this world. That's the shocking truth of John 3:16 and 17. God so loves this world filled to overflowing with evil works and darkness. God loves this world so much that God sends the Son of Man, God's Son, not to condemn it, but to save it. Not much worried about punishing offenders. Not much invested in inflicting a penalty for wrongdoings. No. We find a God who seeks to forgive, for whom restorative justice is the priority, who seeks to repair the hurt – not inflict another. And this, too, arises out of God’s love for us.

God loves us too much to cause us to cower in fear. God loves us too much to inflict corporal punishment on us. God loves us too much to make us suffer – or to suffer any more than we already do. And that is Good News for us, for all of Christianity, and for all of the world. And this is what we celebrate in baptism today. In baptism, we die to our sin, and become alive in Christ. Our sins are washed away, and we are whiter than snow; and all God sees is Christ in us. God loves us so much that he makes covenant with us, born through the Spirit, to make us his own.

Yet, for love to be fully realized, it demands a response. The appropriate response to God’s love is faith. Jesus calls on us to believe, and the psalmist reminds us that faith is often the action of knowing from whom to ask for help. To look up and see the man on the cross. To look away from our own hurts and pains and fears and doubts and take just a moment to cast our eyes skywards and see the man on a pole. To look up and see the light…

That's the call for those of us who have received the gift of God's Son. To look up, to lift our eyes to the man on the cross, to reflect his light. To love the world God so loves. Reflect the light that both exposes evil and reveals truth. This requires entering those places of deep darkness, not turning away from them.

It isn't enough to hold up posters, or put a bumper sticker on our car, or memorize the verse. We who were once dead in sin but are now alive together with Christ - not through our own doing, but through God's power and grace - are "created in Christ Jesus for good works" and must walk in those good works, especially in places of darkness and evil.

Look up, look away from the snakes, the snake bites, the fears and doubts and pain. Look up to the cross, see the light and then reflect it. Reflect by loving as God loves this world. Heal as God heals. Reach out to all the hurts and pain in the world, into the dark places and help them to look up. To see the love of Christ in what you offer when you stand by the abused and the addicted, when you visit the prisoner and when you feed the hungry. When you provide a place for the homeless and stand up for the least of these, the oppressed and the marginalized. Look up, be healed and love.

God so loves this world. Do we?