

Our Old Testament lesson today is a strange and obscure Bible story from the book of Numbers.

The setting is the children of Israel wandering in the wilderness. They've been freed from slavery in Egypt. But they're grumbling against God.

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."

So God decides to get their attention. God sends a plague of poisonous serpents among the people. People get bitten, and some people die. That's rather a tough way to grab someone's attention. But it does grab their attention.

The people come to Moses and say, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prays for the people.

And God has a really weird prescription. "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.'"

God doesn't get rid of the snakes. He gives the people a way to live in the midst of the snakes.

It seems a little too magical for my tastes: Look at a metal snake on a pole and be healed of your snakebite. Doesn't sound like the way God usually operates in scripture.

The best thing I can come up with is perhaps God is using looking at the metal snake as a way of showing trust in him. If they trust me enough to do something weird like that, I'll take that as a sign of their faith in me. If they look to the snake, I will heal them.

And so, Moses makes a serpent of bronze, and puts it up on a pole; and whenever a serpent would bite someone, that person could look at the serpent of bronze and live.

That's kind of a weird little story. It would probably be footnoted as a weird little minor story in the OT if it wasn't for one thing.

Jesus uses it to make a heavy theological point about himself. Jesus uses it as the run-up to the famous verse, John 3:16.

So let's turn to our Gospel lesson from the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of John.

Many people know John 3:16 by heart: "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."

A very familiar verse. But to understand John 3:16 he have to talk about the story of Nicodemus. So let's back up briefly to the beginning of ch3.

We're introduced to Nicodemus, who is described as both a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. I've preached about Nicodemus before. Nicodemus might be a good patron saint for 21st century Americans. We certainly would have admired him. We know from scripture that he was wealthy, that he was successful, that was the *crème de la crème*, one of the most highly regarded teachers in Israel. We'd probably point him out to our kids as a successful role model, as someone who had it made. Yet, like so many in our culture, there's something missing in Nicodemus's life. He had it made on all the scales by which we measure success. And yet, that was not enough.

There was something gnawing at his gut. There was a restless part of him that wasn't satisfied with success as the world defines success.

And so he seeks out Jesus. And then, in Jesus and Nicodemus get into a pretty heavy discussion about being part of God's kingdom. We won't go into the details--that's another sermon. But over and over again Nicodemus just can't grasp what Jesus is saying.

So Jesus tries to make it easy. Jesus tries to cut through the clutter.

Jesus says, in effect, there's only one possible person who can tell you fully about God. That's someone who came down from heaven. That's the Son of Man.

In other word Jesus is saying, 'That's me. Put your trust in me. Believe the things I'm telling you. If you can't get a handle on God's Kingdom by dealing with abstractions, deal with something concrete. If you're missing something in your life, look to me. Deal with me. Look to me for your salvation. Look to me to fill in the empty places in your heart.'

And that brings us to our Gospel lesson for today. John 3:14. In John 3:14, Jesus flashes back 1200 years to that obscure Bible story from the book of Numbers.

Moses, putting the bronze snake on a pole in the middle of the camp, and the people looking at that snake and being saved

Jesus tells Nicodemus the same thing. "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." Jesus message is this. 'Just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent on a pole, I'm going to be lifted up, I'm going to be hung on a pole, I'm going to hung on a cross. And like that serpent, anyone who looks to me will be saved. Whoever looks to me, whoever believes in me, will have eternal life.'

Now for us, all that bronze serpent stuff is a bit obscure. But Nicodemus was a Jewish teacher. He would have known that story from Numbers backwards, forwards, and sideways. For Nicodemus, the meaning would be powerful. You want to be saved. You want real life. Then look to Jesus.

Jesus makes it really simple. No abstractions. Something concrete. Jesus says, 'You want to know God? Get to know me. You want to know what God wants? Listen to me, believe me, trust me. You want salvation? Look to me, hanging on the cross on your behalf.'

Why? The answer is Love. We say, "God is Love." That's true, but that's not nearly complete enough. That brings us to the famous verse 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."

John 3:16 is more than just saying, "God is Love." It's saying, God loved all of us, God loved the world so much that he did something incredible for us. He gave us his son. "God so loved... that he GAVE!."

He gave Jesus to be lifted up and to die on our behalf, so that we might look to him and be saved, so that all who believe in him might have eternal life.

The Son will be lifted high upon the cross. This the is the way God shows his love to the world.

God sent his Son to us, so that we might be saved, so that we might be healed, so that we might be made whole, so that we might be brought into God's Kingdom, so that we might experience new life in the here and now. This is the good news.

And it is echoed in John 3:17, a verse which should be just as important as 3:16: "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." The Son, lifted up on the cross--he is the source of salvation--he is God's love make known.

The Good News for us is the same as it was for Nicodemus. You enter God's Kingdom by making a new beginning. Stop trusting in yourself. Start trusting Jesus.

It's not about what you can do. It's about trusting in Jesus. It's not about your status or your wealth or your power or anything about you. It's about trusting in God's love.

The Son has been lifted up on our behalf.  
Look to him. Believe in him. Find life in him.