

Scripture:

Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:14-21

“High and lifted up.”

“Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” ---- the first 2 verse of John chapter 3.

This is the very beginning of the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus that we pick up at verse 14 in our gospel reading today.

And clearly there’s an element of secrecy to the way Nicodemus comes to Jesus.

He comes to Him at night ---- likely in an attempt to ensure that no one sees him under the cover of darkness.

After all ---- he --- Nicodemus ----- is a Pharisee --- a high ranking member of the Jewish ruling council --- the Sanhedrin ---- and so going to see Jesus - --- would have been frowned upon and seen as rather questionable and poor judgment.

Why would such a high ranking official go to see this Jesus of Nazareth?

It was a risky move --- that would only have been met with disapproval.

And yet Nicodemus does.

And he not only wants to go to Jesus ----- but he clearly goes to Him as a respected teacher and man of God --- calling Him Rabbi ---- and teacher --- and stating that God must be with Him for Jesus to do some of the things He has done.

Unlike the other Pharisees Nicodemus had come to the conclusion that the young Nazarene Jesus --- was divinely commissioned by God and is eager to have a private personal conversation with Him without any interruptions.

So it's a calm and cool night --- the day has slowed down ---- the city is beginning to go to sleep ----- and ---- Nicodemus goes under the passage of night to see Jesus ----- and 2 theological giants sit down to converse.

In our time --- had anyone got wind of this kind of meeting ---- it would be a media frenzy ---- CNN --- BBC ----- CBC ---- NBC ---- CTV ---- ABC ----- Euronews ---- and so on.

But ---- instead --- on account of Nicodemus' cunning ----- it's simply 2 theological giants in the dead of night talking about the Kingdom of God.

After having spoken about being born again in the verses preceding our gospel passage today Jesus says in the opening verses to our passage for today -----

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness. So the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

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Nicodemus ---- an expert --- and expositor of Jewish law and the Old Testament ---- would have been intimately familiar with the passage Jesus refers to where Moses lifts up the bronze serpent in the wilderness.

Numbers 21 ----- our Old Testament reading this morning.

High and lifted up was the serpent in the book of Numbers ----- and all those who turned to it and looked were saved from the sure and certain death of being snakebit.

High and lifted up is Jesus Christ ----- and all those who turn to Him and believe ----- will be saved from sure and certain death ---- from enslavement to sin ----- and everything else that kills and erodes away at us.

Jean Vanier --- Canadian theologian --- founder of L'Arche Communities for people with developmental disabilities ----- and recent winner of the \$1.7 million Templeton prize --- which incidentally was founded by a Presbyterian Elder John Templeton ---- said this about our passage from John's gospel today ---- it's almost like a quick summary of the passage.

Jean Vanier on John 3 -----

“Jesus came to save us from all those fears that close us up in ourselves.
He came to liberate us and open us up to love.
He came to give us the very life of God so that it may flow in us and through us.

It flows in us because Jesus was lifted up on the cross ----
---- lifted up in his resurrection ---
----- lifted up in the glory of the Father.

To open ourselves up to this new life ----- is like making a journey or going on a pilgrimage.

We are walking towards a holy land --- or the Kingdom of God ---- led by the Spirit of Jesus.

The road can sometimes be rough and torturous.

There can be stress and heavy winds.

We have to struggle with pain.

The road ahead is not always clear.”

Jean Vanier is right ----- Jesus did come to save us from all those fears that close us up in ourselves ----- and He did so by being high and lifted up --- in the glory of God the Father.

And both of our scripture passages this morning ---- invite us to look at what God has lifted up ----- and to re-orient ourselves around the gift of new life.

In the book of Numbers today the Israelites ---- quickly learn that to protest against God’s rule always proves to be self destructive.

They are whining and complaining about how tough things are --- and how back in Egypt --- even though they were slaves ---- at least they had food and water--- and were safe and provided for.

But of course if we look back ---- we soon see that they whined and complained when they were in Egypt too.

Understandable really ----- they longed to be freed from making bricks endlessly in the heat of the sun ----- day in and day out without any hope of advancing or a better life.

But now ----- God has finally freed them and here they are again whining about their conditions ----- being impatient ---- wanting God to be quicker.

And they are impatient ---- precisely because they are stuck in the here and now --- and can't see beyond their immediate conditions.

They can't see beyond their current day to day living and are crippled by their immediate and temporary circumstances.

So --- to get them to lift their heads and see beyond just the present --- God sends deadly venous snakes to bit them.

It sounds kind of odd --- doesn't it ---- send deadly venomous snakes to get their attention and remind them to have patience for there are good things to come ----- but as always God has a plan.

And as always ---- God also provides for them in His great plan.

But --- as was --- and is so often the case ---- God provides for them in the most unusual of ways --- in this case a bronze image.

A bronze snake statue.

And in order to be saved they have to shift there lazy eyes from their current circumstances --- and look up at it --- otherwise they will die.

And of course as they lift their heads and look up ---- they are physically --- individually ----- and collectively ---- forced to see beyond their immediate circumstances --- desert wandering --- poor food --- poor clothing --- snakes lashing out from behind rocks and bushes and piercing their skin with deadly venom.

The truth is ---- sometimes God has to do something a little painful and uncomfortable ----- to get us to look up to Him --- and see beyond just our current circumstances.

That was certainly the case with the Israelites as they wandered in the desert freed from slavery in Egypt --- and headed to the Promised Land.

This event from the book of Numbers invites us to re-orient ourselves around God's gift of new life.

And this event also reminds us that protest against God's rule always proves to be self-destructive.

Two of the very same truths we find in John's gospel reading today.

In John's gospel are we invited to re-orient our lives around God's gift of new and everlasting life --- Jesus Christ high and lifted up --- first on the cross --- and then at the resurrection --- forever in the glory of the Father.

And John's gospel also reminds us that protest and denial of God's rule ultimately always proves self-destructive.

Picking it up at verse 18 from John's gospel today ---- "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already ..."

"Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already ..."

Just as protest and denial of God's rule --- always ultimately proves self-destructive ----- so trust --- belief ---- and ascent ----- always leads to salvation and new and everlasting life.

And the eternal life that Jesus speaks about in saying --- perhaps the most well known verse in all of scripture ----- John 3:16 ----- "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." --- is not just eternal --- as in after death as we know it --- although it is that as well.

But when Jesus speaks of eternal life --- He also means the very life of God - ---- here and now --- flowing in and through us in the present.

This eternal and divine life that Jesus refers to ----- is yes --- life after death - --- - but it also includes life in the present ---- life now ----- how we live now ---- and the deeds towards which we are drawn in our very brief time here on earth.

God acts to save the world --- to send it the light it so desperately needs -----
to rescue it from itself --- not just later --- at the end of time as we know it ---
----- but also now --- in the present.

The day Jesus was crucified the world was saved --- rescued --- and granted
eternal life ---- in that instant.

And the minute Christ walks into our lives we are saved ---- rescued -----
and granted eternal life.

And just like salvation ---- eternal life ---- isn't just something we come to
when we die.

It also starts the minute He comes to us ---- eternal means everlasting yes ---
but eternal doesn't mean -----“On hold until we die!” --- kicking in only
after we die.

Eternal life started the minute Christ was lifted up ---- and eternal life starts
the minute we come to know Him as the saving One.

It's curious to me that in the book of Numbers today ---- God uses a symbol
of the very problem to be solved as the solution to the problem --- snake
bitten victims had to stare at the image of a snake in order to be saved from a
snake.

And it's similar in the New Testament --- in John's gospel today we look to
the very thing that frightens so many of us the most in life ----- death -----
and somehow find in it the very path to eternal life.

The great Exodus paradox for the Israelites as they wandered in the desert ---
look up to the image of a snake in order to survive the deadly effects of the
snake.

The great Divine and saving paradox ---- only through death --- brutal death
----- and betrayal ---- comes life ----- life beautiful and abundant and
everlasting.

It's paradoxical truths like this that remind us that no one can ever be
explained ----- or intellectually argued into faith.

Nicodemus --- a bright shining intellectual --- a religious --- and faithful servant of God --- a leader in the Jewish ruling council --- a Pharisee --- a respected teacher ---- comes to Jesus with questions.

And Jesus blows them all apart --- with talk of being born again --- and eternal life coming through brutal death.

None of the logic ----- and law ---- and intellectual brilliance of people like the Pharisees could ever grasp the beauty ---- and wonder --- and saving love of Christ without also surrender.

Without --- looking up to God --- giving over in faith and trust ---- and ceasing to always have to understand and explain intellectually.

Perhaps some of us have heard this story before --- if so bear with me --- for the sake of those who haven't heard it yet.

A man is walking down the street and suddenly falls into a deep hole that he didn't see.

The hole is deep and the walls are steep ---- he's stuck --- there is no way out --- at least not with out some help from beyond.

Finally after a considerable wait a psychiatrist happens to walk on by --- and the man hollers out ----- "Hey Doc --- can you help me out here --- I'm stuck and I need some help?"

The doctor looks down into the hole and steps back and writes a prescription for anxiety and depression disorder --- and throws it into the hole and then keeps on walking.

A little while later a priest approaches the hole --- and the man thinks to himself ----- finally ----- now maybe I'll actually get some help that is actually helpful ----- and so he yells up out of the hole ---- "Hey father --- can you help me out here --- I've fallen into this hole and I can't seem to get out of here --- can you give me hand ----- get a rope or something -----maybe get some other people to help pull me up."

But like the psychiatrist the priest isn't all that helpful either.

Like the psychiatrist he too takes out a piece of paper --- only instead of a prescription ---- he writes down a prayer and throws it into the hole --- and keeps on walking.

A little while later the man's best friend walks by ----- looks down ----- sees his friend down in the hole and immediately jumps right in with him.

"Aww come on --- what did you do that for?" --- the man says ---- "Now we're both stuck in here."

"No no." ----- the man's friend says ----- "I've been down here before myself --- and I know the way out --- come follow me."

That's Jesus --- down in the sometimes dirty --- deep --- muddy hole of life - --- leading us up and out into new life.

In this world of sin and evil ---- there are so many dark deep pits that we can fall into --- or find ourselves in before we even realize what has happened.

And for each of us there is finally a six foot deep hole in the ground waiting for us in a cemetery somewhere.

Thanks to God --- Jesus has already been down in that hole Himself --- and He knows the way out.

And He is there to lead us out and rescue us.

And thankfully even Pharisees like Nicodemus --- brilliant by worldly standards --- faithful ---- religious --- a good guy ---- a community leader ---- ---- teacher --- someone people looked up to and held in high esteem.

Thankfully even someone like him seemingly stuck in his ways ---- entrenched in the pre-Christ ways ---- can be opened up by God and change.

Follow Nicodemus through John's gospel ----- it's a fascinating story --- the life Nicodemus lived.

Here in John's gospel chapter 3 we see him impressed with Jesus --- convinced enough by His miracles --- that he goes to him in the dark of night.

And then later on when the Sanhedrin --- the Jewish ruling council who arrest Jesus --- of which Nicodemus is a member --- when they begin to denounce Jesus --- Nicodemus stands up for him ----- saying to the rest of the council --- "Hey wait a minute here --- don't we first need to hear someone out ----- and learn about them in their own words before we arrest them." --- but to no avail --- see John 7 starting at verse 50.

And again later on ----- also in John's gospel ---- chapter 19 verse 39 --- after Jesus has died ---- Nicodemus is the one who provides the myrrh and aloes necessary for Jesus' body at the time of burial ---- and he assists in preparing Jesus' body.

Maybe just maybe ----- Nicodemus --- somehow understood the whole born again thing that night he met with Jesus.

And maybe just maybe Nicodemus somehow understood the high and lifted up thing too.

And then maybe just maybe Nicodemus looked up to Jesus as the one to lift him up out of the hole of death and enslavement to sin.

And maybe Nicodemus believed that God so love the world that He sent His Son --- that whoever believes in Him shall not die but have life eternal.

If anyone had of tried to explain to the Israelites on an intellectual level why they ought to look up to the bronze image of a snake in order to stave off death from a snake --- they likely would have laughed them off --- why stare at a statue of a snake in order to save you from the deadly bite of a snake.

But they do it ---- and God saves them from sure and certain death.

We can't explain it ---- intellectualize it ----- argue or convince someone into walking with Christ ---- breaking it down into logical steps --- the way we can building a house --- baking a cake --- or changing the brake pads on our car ----- or the strings on our guitar ----- but it is true --- and saving and real.

High and lifted up ----- Jesus comes to us.

High and lifted up on the cross ----- high and lifted up out of the grave ----
and high and lifted up in the glory of the Father.

All we have to do is believe.

For God does love us so much so that He gives this to us.

Life abundant and eternal.

Life free from enslavement to death and worldly --- short term pleasing -----
controlling and decaying things.

High and lifted up is Jesus.

And high and lifted up ----- can we too be.

If we believe.

And respond.

And allow Him --- Jesus.

To jump down into the deep dark pit that life can sometimes be ----- and
then follow Him as He leads us home into God's eternal ---- saving --- and
beautiful presence.

Amen.