

**March 14, 2021**

I love our little forays into the Gospel of John. There is so much packed into these stories... John is symbolized by the eagle-- sees a big picture.

Our gospel reading today is a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus is an important religious leader. And he has some inkling that Jesus might actually be who he says he is-- the Son of God. So, he's curious, but also cautious... Hence, he comes to Jesus under the cloak of darkness, he doesn't want anyone to see him. In effect he's hiding in the darkness.

It seems his heart is eager to listen and believe, but his head just can't allow that to happen. Jesus speaks in metaphor and truth, and Nicodemus struggles... He hears things literally. What is so ironic in this text is that Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the dark, and is talking to the one who is the light of the world.

Jesus references our Old Testament reading today from the book of Numbers. The Israelites are wandering in the wilderness, and they are an impatient/malcontent group. They spoke out against God and against Moses... They detest the miserable food; they fear they will die out there. They were unhappy campers... They were fighting each other and quarrelling and complaining...

And because of all that conflict, God sends poisonous snakes to bite them and many of them die.

Quick story... I'm not a big fan of snakes. I know some people keep them for pets-- I'm not one of them. One day when we were living in our log cabin, I found

a pretty good-sized gardener snake in our basement. I thought, ok well, just grab it by the tail, and throw it out. Well, that day I learned that gardener snakes' bite. And it hurt! So, no more just grabbing gardener snakes!

Then there was a time when I was building some fences for my sheep, I was using old railroad ties for the corners. The person who delivered them just dropped them in a big pile, they were all kitty-whompas. I had to sort them all out. I was getting close to the end of the pile, when I grabbed one and lifted it up, and I heard that unmistakable sound of a rattle. I was shocked... I pretty much dropped the tie and ran. I didn't want to meet that snake!

I don't like snakes. And I imagine those Israelites didn't either, because many of them died. As a solution to the snake problem, God told Moses to put a poisonous snake on a pole and if an Israelite was bit, that person would look upon that snake and they would be healed. In other words, healing came from facing the snake that bit them.

What if those poisonous snakes were all ways in which the people were hurting one another? All the ways they were back biting and name calling and blaming... Sometimes we are the snake that bites others. Sometimes we are the ones who feel a little snake bit...

And for us, perhaps all the ways we hurt one another. When we say something mean that slips out before we can stop it. Or we lash out at someone, even someone we love... In reality, we're both. We're in bondage to sin and this hurting one another is our reality.

That snake on a pole is a little like a mirror. We have to look at our own poison. When we can see ourselves wounding others... Change happens... Self-awareness happens... Self-reflection is always a good thing. This is the heart of confession and forgiveness...

And like looking at the snake on a pole, Jesus is inviting us to look upon himself on the cross. Jesus says to Nicodemus, "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."

We often associate eternal life with quantity of life... However, biblically, eternal life is also concerned with quality of life. In other words, Jesus is talking about a way of living here on earth as well as in heaven, that is full of meaning and purpose, and overflowing with love, hope and joy...

When I look upon Jesus on a cross, I start thinking about the story of how he got there. I remember the religious people plotting to have him killed. I remember the mob of people yelling crucify him, crucify him.

I wonder, if I had been there, would I have done that? And I have to conclude, yes, I'm just another one of those people in the crowd. I see Jesus' blood on my own hands. Truth is, Jesus' blood is on all of our hands, every time we point our fingers at others.

I also remember Jesus telling the soldiers nailing him to the cross, “Father forgive them, they know not what they do.” Jesus is the forgiving victim. This is the good news, as the one who suffers all our violence, Jesus forgives us. And because of that, we can forgive one another.

And we pray, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” This is integration. And in this forgiveness is light and eternal life.

Amen...