

NUMBERS 21:4-9 (p. 124)

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JOHN 3:1-21 (p. 862)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord, we know that you welcome little children with open arms. And that in Scripture you promise that whoever humbles themselves as a child will be considered great in your Kingdom. So please, this morning, in our time of prayer, cause us to be your humble children. Make us trust in you Lord, like a child trusts—and believe in you Lord, as a child believes. Humble our hearts, as well as our minds, so that we will be teachable. We ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

“LOOK AT THE CROSS”

I'll bet you've noticed how all four Gospels have a slightly different perspective. Each one witnesses to Jesus in a slightly different way. Mark, for instance, is short and sweet, and right to the point. It's attributed to John Mark—a close associate of Peter. Things happen quickly for Mark. He uses phrases like “immediately” and “at once”, in his text. Whereas Matthew writes from a distinctively Jewish perspective. He is usually equated with the tax collector, also known as Levi. Matthew makes sure to connect the Old Testament Prophesies and Promises about Jesus, with His actual life and teaching. Luke, on the other hand, has a completely different audience in mind. He writes to the Gentile Greeks. And presumably, being a Physician, Luke lays out his information in a very orderly and linear way!

But John is different. He uses more colorful language. John uses what I call “wispy” words, and “ethereal” images. He is more “creative” or “artsy”. John talks about everyday things, like bread and water, light and darkness, but he does so in deeply spiritual ways! John weaves together poetic images into multi-layered thoughts! So, you don’t so much hear John as you encounter him or feel him! You simply cannot approach John with just your head. You need to also open up your heart as well!

Just look at how John’s Gospel begins; “the Word becoming flesh and dwelt among us”, “light shines into the darkness”. John tells us, plainly, that Jesus is that light, the “true Light”, the “Light of the World”! But “those living in darkness refuse to understand.” They prefer the “darkness”.

Because John speaks on multiple levels at the same time, Wisdom tends to “dawn” on you, gradually. That’s the way with “flowery language”. Truth sort of slowly creeps up over the horizon. The edges of reality aren’t always clearly defined at first. Things start off a bit fuzzy sometimes—not really invisible, per se—but your eyes need time to adjust, in order for the shadows to completely dissipate! Stay with it though, because they will! Those “sitting in darkness” will discover a “Great Light”!

In Genesis we learn that all life begins in darkness. Darkness is pushed back, though, by God’s Creative Word. What does that say? That same Creative Word, later becomes flesh, John adds! Job tells us that a boundary has been set between darkness and light, a God-given separation! And now we see Nicodemus coming to Jesus in the dark!

It is night, and a Pharisee, an apparent Seeker of truth, a member of the Jewish Ruling Council, an educated theologian, comes to Jesus with questions! “Rabbi,” he says, “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. But Teacher, I need to know more!”

Nicodemus has seen some things, obviously, miraculous things, things that Jesus has been doing. He has gotten a glimmer of the Light. And now, he wants Jesus to pierce the darkness even further! On a lonely stretch of road, in a darkened city, Nicodemus approaches our Lord. He is alone, a complete stranger, and yet he queries Jesus on the meaning of life. I wonder if the hood of his robe was pulled down tightly over his face? Do you think his voice was quiet and subdued? Nicodemus clearly doesn't want to be seen talking with Jesus. Which is most likely why, he comes to Jesus at night, in the dark!

Nicodemus is a man of influence and means! He is a Pharisee, a religious leader, a member of the Jewish Ruling Council! He has rank and privilege! Other people come to him to be enlightened, to him for advice! And yet in darkness, Nicodemus comes to Jesus! There are rich, Multi-Faceted Meanings here, aren't there. So, we need to mine the Gems of Truth!

Why do you think this brilliant Scholar came searching for answers at night? Was he afraid of rejection, either by Jesus, or the other members of the Good Old Boys Club? Was he worried, perhaps, that someone might see him talking with Jesus and maybe start

poking fun? That happens, you know, to those who seek truth.

Was Nicodemus concerned that the more religiously orthodox might find fault with his actions, and expel him from the synagogue, or sanction him in some way for his unorthodox approach to truth? “Tell me Jesus,” he asks, “how does all this fit together? You see, I really want to know!”

“No one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again,” says Jesus. “How can that be,” answers Nicodemus. “You need to be born of both water and Spirit,” says Jesus. “How can that be,” answers Nicodemus. “You’re one of Israel’s teachers,” says Jesus, “and yet you do not understand! I have been speaking to you about earthly things, and you still don’t get it! How then will you ever hope to understand Heavenly things! Listen! Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up. That way, everyone who believes may live! 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!”

That snake reference doesn’t make things immediately clear, does it? It is not one of the best-known passages in Scripture! You don’t see it on signs at sporting events, like the passage that follows it, or on millions of bumper stickers just about everywhere you turn! “Just like Moses lifted up a snake”! Nicodemus, though, being a biblical scholar, as well as a Teacher of the Law, would have immediately gotten Jesus’ reference!

The Israelites are out in the wilderness in our first reading this morning, somewhere between slavery in Egypt and abundant life in the Promised Land! Apparently, there are

more layers of meaning.

God's people are grumbling, as usual! Complaining, again! God has rescued them from a life of captivity, saved them from certain death during the plagues—caused the Angel of Death to Passover the homes of the faithful, of those who were obedient to the Lord's commands! And they respond by being crabby!

The Lord has delivered them from Pharaoh's army, parted the Red Sea. Recently, in fact, because they are still in the neighborhood. The Lord has provided for their every need! God gave them water in the middle of the desert, from a rock, no less—provided Manna for them to eat, bread from Heaven. Every morning it was just laying there on the ground! All they had to do was pick it up! And on the day before the Sabbath, there was always twice as much, so that they didn't have to work on The Lord's Day! And to this, they responded by complaining! Hebrew Scholars call it "murmuring". And this time, they are murmuring about the food!

God provided Salvation, a way out of death—and Sustenance, everything they could possibly need to survive—and Freedom, as well as the promise of abundant life in the Promised Land! But rather than trust the Lord, rather than place their faith in Him, they start looking back to their old way of life, to those caged patterns and worldly values.

They actually Sin against God by their lack of faith. And against God's appointed leader with their grumbling. So, God, in turn, maybe in Divine Punishment, sends a plague of poisonous snakes to beseech them! "Fiery Serpents" is the literal translation, "Seraph

Serpents”, it says in the Hebrew, as in “Angelic Snakes”!

This plague comes directly from God! There is no doubt about it! More symbolism. More layers of meaning.

A lot of people hate snakes. Have you noticed? A Harris Poll found that in the United States forty-nine percent of women, and twenty percent of men, cringe at even the thought of snakes! That’s in spite of the fact that more people die each year from bee stings than from snake bites! There is just something primordial about the fear of snakes!

Pharaoh had one, if you recall, on his golden Headdress. A Cobra, to be exact! Its purpose was to “spit venom on his enemies”. Moses had one too. His Staff was transformed into a snake at the very beginning of the Exodus, remember! The Greek god Asclepius had a snake—a single snake wrapped around a pole—a symbol of death—but also, a symbol of healing and rejuvenation. And the Sumerian god Caduceus had two snakes wrapped around a staff, one for threat, and the other for salve. You’ve probably seen it. The American Medical Association uses it as a logo! There was a snake back in Eden too, remember, when death first entered the Garden. There is something visceral that happens when people think of snakes!

You can see why the Israelites would have cried out when they saw the serpents, can’t you? Especially since these are “Fiery Serpents”, “Angelic Serpents”, sent by God, as an obvious result of their sin! I mean they are in the desert, wandering around for forty years in the first place, because of their lack of faith. Their children and grandchildren will

now inherit the Promised Land, instead of them, simply because they wouldn't believe! And now, since they still stubbornly refuse to accept the truth in faith, they face certain death, from serpents! Can you see the symbolism? Can you hear the echoes down through the centuries? Do you think maybe Nicodemus did?

The Israelites, hundreds of years earlier, repented, and confessed their sin. "We sinned when we grumbled against you Lord, and against your servant Moses? Please, take these snakes away!" "Save Us Lord!" And the Lord relented! He ceased from sending Divine Punishment! More parallels, right! More layers!

God even had Moses set up a Bronze Snake, high and lifted up on a pole, in front of the people as a visual symbol of death, but also of new life! It became a focal point, in fact, of faith in the Lord, in God's Saving Grace, something tangible that the people could see, and therefore be reminded of the depth of God's love! If they could just have faith in God's Promise, if they could just trust the Lord based on all that they've seen, all that they've been taught, then they could have life in His Presence! I hope you can see the symbolism, because Nicodemus would have!

"I am the God of Justice," declares the Lord, "the One who sends punishment for sin! But I am also the God of Mercy and Grace, who sends a remedy, a way to be healed! And in order for you to have it, you need to keep your eyes on me! I am God, the causative agent in both the good times and the bad! I'm the One who freed you from Captivity and Bondage, the One who walks beside you in the wilderness, who guides you into the

Promised Land!”

“I’m the One who parts the waters for you, and feeds you, and provides for your every need—the One who heals your hurts, even the sting of death, even from Serpent Angels!

So, I am going to give you a graphic, visual reminder of this! And more importantly, a reminder of my love behind it!” “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life”! The layers just go deeper and deeper, don’t they!

Right now, Nicodemus is still standing in the dark. But he is asking about the signs and wonders! He is impressed with Jesus’ great teaching ability and brilliant discourse. He is fascinated with how Jesus heals the pain of the world! Nicodemus can logically discern that there is something special about this Man, maybe even something extraordinarily special! But he can’t quite get his head around what that is! And a lot of people today, are right there with him!

So, Jesus says “open up your heart”! This is spiritual thing Nicodemus, not a logical one! And therefore, in order to understand, you need to be “born of the Spirit”! Open up your spirit Nicodemus! Freely receive this truth! “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him, puts their faith in Him, obediently follows Him, may have eternal life.”

That passage is pretty common today. We do see it on banners and bumper stickers. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whosoever believes in

Him shall have Eternal Life!” Only what does it mean to truly “believe”?

Believing is not just intellectual assent. The word does not mean a momentary acknowledgment of the truth. Believing is not something you did, but rather, something you do! Believing, in Scripture, is having on-going confidence in Jesus as both Savior and Lord! And then, shaping your life in such a way that you are obedient to His commands! Believing is a process, a journey, something that you decide you are going to do! And then choosing to do it for the rest of your life! Whoever believes in Him shall have Eternal Life!

Just as an aside, we encounter Nicodemus two more times in Scripture. The first is in John, Chapter 7, when the Chief Priests and Pharisees are all wound-up into a frenzy, ready to arrest Jesus and have Him killed. There, Nicodemus, one of their own, stands up in court and defends Him, “Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?” The second time is in Chapter 19. Here, Nicodemus is helping Joseph of Arimathea anoint Jesus’s body with oil and wrap Him for burial in the Garden Tomb. Apparently, the light pierced the darkness in Nicodemus’ heart!

So, let me ask you; When someone looks at you, as a Christian I mean, as part of the Body of Christ, high and lifted up, do they see a symbol of life and healing, or one of death? Are people encouraged by looking at you, encourage to faith in the Lord even, by what they witness in your actions, your love, your faith? Do they see the Cross of Jesus reflected? Are they drawn to it, and are thus saved? Or are they turned away, repulsed by what they see? Are your actions, or lack thereof, keeping people in the dark? In short, do

you help them believe? And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Oh, Holy and Gracious God, it is amazing to spend time with you in prayer. It is a joy to open up our spirits to your Holy Spirit, and our lives to your transforming Presence. It is a pleasure Lord, to open up our hearts to your love, and our minds to the light of your truth. In short Father, it feels good to be your people.

We thank you for showering our lives with Blessings, with Blessings that are obvious, and especially with Blessings that we do not see. Open up our eyes to these Lord, so that we might appreciate your Grace even more. And so that we, in turn, might become even bigger Blessings in the lives of those around us.

Thank you for creating us in your image Lord, so that we are able to reach out in love. Thank you for allowing us to be present in times of difficulty for others, just as you are constantly there for us! And thank you for drawing us ever closer to you, and for using us to draw others near as well. We long to be a healing presence in this world Father, and powerful witnesses to your Son.

As a church Lord, and as your people who meet in the Name of Jesus—as those empowered by your Holy Spirit—we come before you now in prayer. We lift up our joys and our celebrations, our moments of happiness and smiles. And we thank you for each and every one! We also place before you our burdens as well, and those loved ones who are presently carrying their own burdens. Father, please be with Please also be with the leaders of this troubled world. And help us to find ways to support them. Please be with your church Lord. And cause us to be a powerful witness to your Glory. And please be with each of us, ever drawing us nearer to your Throne of Grace. We ask these

things in Jesus' Name, as we pray now in the way that He taught us saying, Our Father...