

Numbers 21:4-9

21:4 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.

21:5 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."

21:6 Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.

21:7 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.

21:8 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."

21:9 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.

John 3:14-21

3:14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
3:15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

3:16 "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.

3:17 "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.

3:18 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.

3:19 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.

3:20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

3:21 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."

Proclamation of the Word

History records that when Abraham Lincoln was seven years old, his family was forced out of their home on a legal technicality, and he had to work to help support them. At age nine, his mother died. At age twenty-two, he lost his job as a store clerk. He wanted to go to law school, but his education was lacking. At twenty-three, he went into debt to become a partner in a small store. At twenty-six, his business partner died, leaving him a huge debt that took years to repay. At twenty-eight, after courting

a young woman for four years, he asked her to marry him but she said no. At thirty-seven, on his third try, he was elected to Congress, but two years later, he lost re-election. At forty-one, his four-year-old son died. At forty-five, he ran for the Senate and lost. At forty-seven, he failed as the vice-presidential candidate. At forty-nine, he ran for the Senate again, and lost. At fifty-one, he was elected president of the United States and became one of the greatest leaders of this nation." (His tenure as President was marred by bitter conflict and adversity of the Civil War.)

When someone asked Lincoln what enabled him to endure a life of hardship, he replied, "Faith in God."ⁱ

Faith in God- what does that mean? The gospel writer John uses the word "belief" rather than faith.

John 3:16- the most famous Bible Verse, "the gospel in a nutshell," as Martin Luther wrote, reads, "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."

The word "belief" is a bit problematic for us. It's a word that we toss around like a ball as in "I believe the Yankees will win." or "I believe in the right to free speech." But belief is so much more than an intellectual assent to an idea or concept. In John's gospel belief is trust and faith which go so much deeper than belief in an idea. If you know Lincoln's story, you know that he struggled with beliefs all the time, but in the end faith in God's will carried him through life. He was known for his skepticism, and as President his orthodoxy was often questionedⁱⁱ. Lincoln wrestled with faith and doubt, it seems, from testimony of friends and the writings Pastor Gurley of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church with whom he met. His beliefs were the topic of much public debate.

"Belief" in the gospel does include, first of all, believing that what Jesus declares about God, the Father, is true. Secondly, Jesus tells us that he came to give witness to the Father and that he and the Father are one. So believing also means trusting that Jesus and the Father were one which means Jesus is the Son of God. But belief has a third element, a life marked by that faith. If we believe, we will trust and obey the Lord who created us. John writes that some live in the light and their faith becomes clear. Others remain in darkness.

While we may wrestle with belief, trust, and faith, the good news is that God is steady and sure in God's intentions. "For God so LOVED the world,"....out of great love God comes to us in the person of Jesus to show us the true nature of God. God's nature is to love and to give. God's love is generous. God's faithful promises to Abraham and Sarah, to the faithful Israelites, now includes God's coming to the whole world, Gentile and Jew- a fulfillment of the promise to bless all nations through Abraham. And Jesus comes to demonstrate in obedient love, so we may know God's love, not condemnation. As the great theologian Augustine wrote, "God loves us as if there was only one of us to love."

God's grace is true, and we can believe it!

But like Lincoln's life reminds us, that love, that gift of grace, does not make us immune to suffering and hardship. In fact, God uses snakes and a cross, to redeem us. The very thing intended for harm becomes that which heals us and restores us. The recounting of the snakes in the wilderness with Moses and God's people is strange indeed. To summarize, soon after the Law and Commandments are given to Moses on the mountain, the people begin to complain in the wilderness. Snakes afflict the people for their lack of faith in God's promises. They cry for help from God. The Lord instructs Moses to place the snake on a pole. When the people look at the snake upon the pole, trusting in the Lord, they will be healed. In John's gospel, Jesus speaks of this in connection to his being sent to the world. In the same way he will be lifting up on a cross and become a means of healing, grace, and salvation.

You can see a sculpture pictured in your bulletin which shows the cross with Jesus hanging upon it intertwined with the serpent. This unique cross sits at the Friary at the spot believed to be where Moses died before entering the Promised Land. What was meant for harm, both the serpent and cross, become a means of grace in the hands of God.

Think about it this way. With all the talk of vaccinations lately, the very disease that can cause us illness is used in very small doses to cause our bodies to produce antibodies. Antibodies attack and help us remain healthy much like an anti-venom would counteract a snake bite. A vaccination makes us immune to the devastating effects of disease. God's gracious love demonstrated by Jesus through the cross and resurrection becomes an antibody, a way by which, we might be saved. The cross is a way through that leads to being fully alive in God.

When the Hebrews were in trouble, they recognized their need that turned to the Lord for help. Perhaps that is the kind of faith shown by Lincoln, even with doubts about belief, there was trust. In trust we know our own utter need and dependence on God's grace and help.

Think about that. Remember that this passage we read from John is a response to an encounter in the evening with Nicodemus. In effect the passage is Jesus' sermon to Nicodemus. Nicodemus, a Pharisee who had committed his life to keeping the letter of the law, come to the rabbi in the night. Jesus basically tells Nicodemus, you cannot save yourself by keeping all of the Law. You must be born from above. You must be utterly dependent on God's grace.

When we close today we will sing a Christmas Carol- Hark the Herald!ⁱⁱⁱ We will sing echoes of this passage with these words:

Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings...Born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth...

God's grace gives us that new life. Paul writes about faith in the letter to the Ephesians which is also a reading for today. He writes, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is a gift from God." (Ephesians 2:8) This verse became the battle cry of the Protestant

Reformation because it reminds us that we are utterly dependent on the grace of God and even faith is a gift of God's grace. Nicodemus is perplexed because grace is so hard to grasp.

I relate to him rather than judge him.

How often do we "soldier on" expecting that we can handle everything without God's help?

How often we act as if we are architects of our own destiny rather than open vessels seeking God's direction and guidance?

Grace is so hard to grasp. Just look at how confused Nicodemus was. Jesus reminds Nicodemus and us, that only when we entrust our whole life into God's hands, will we know the gift of full and eternal life. Eternal is a quality of life, not a timing issue. Eternal life is not about quantity of life, but quality. It is not immortality, but living always in the presence of God.

Living in the presence of God is what helps us endure life and all its hardships. It also makes the joys even sweeter. God's grace is that which helps us see in the darkness. Grace helps us live in the light. Grace is truly a gift. Frederick Buechner writes this about grace,

Grace is God in his givenness. Faith... is a response to the givenness of grace. Faith is given a glimpse of something, however dimly. Men and women of faith know they are strangers and exiles on the earth because somehow and somewhere along the line they have been given a glimpse of home... By grace we see what we see. To have faith is to respond to what we see by longing for it the rest of our days; by trying to live up to it and toward it through all the wonderful and terrible things; by breathing it in like air and growing strong on it; by looking to see it again and see it better. To lose faith is to stop looking. ^{iv}

Belief and faith means looking to Jesus, training our eyes to look up to the cross where God's glory is most clearly seen in the self-giving, even suffering, love of God in Jesus.

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ⁱ life illustration of Lincoln as recounted at ministrymatters.com/preach/entry/2445/sermon-options-march-15-2015

ⁱⁱNote- When Lincoln once attended a revival, the evangelist asked those who intended on going to heaven to stand up. Then he asked those who intended on going to hell to stand up. When Lincoln did not stand for either, the evangelist Cartwright asked, "May I enquire where you plan to go?. Lincoln replied, "I did not come here to be singled out, but since you ask, I will reply with equal candor. I intend to go to Congress." see Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln; The War Years* (New York; Harcourt, Brace, and Co, 1939) Vol.1, 630.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Hark the Herald! Angels Sing," Hymn 119 in *Glory to God*

^{iv} Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark; a Life in Sermons* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006)