

## Facing Our Fears

Text: Numbers 21: 4-9

Ephesians 2: 1-10 (Series B, 4th Sunday in Lent) Ps. 107: 1-3, 17-22

John 3: 14-21

Prayer:

British medical student, Roger Bannister was the first person to run a mile in less than four minutes, an amazing physical and psychological achievement. But then, not too long afterward, an Australian athlete John Landy ran it more than a second faster. The two came head to head in 1954 at the *British Empire* games in Vancouver. It was to be the race of the century!

As they neared the finish line, Landy was ahead of Bannister by about two strides, but in an instant where he looked over his left shoulder Bannister shot past him on the right side and won by a couple of yards. Landy had *lost his focus*, if only for a split second, but it cost him the race. Even though both of them ran it in under 4 minutes Bannister was the winner.

In our lesson from the book of Numbers for this morning we heard of an incident from the wilderness journey of the children of Israel. They too had lost their focus and began to grumble about their situation. So, the people blamed God and they blamed Moses.

The text tells us that poisonous snakes were sent to bite them. When people began to die they went to Moses, acknowledged their lack of *trust* in God and asked to be rid of the serpents. What happens next is quite amazing Moses is told to fashion a snake, the symbol of their *fear* and a symbol of *death* and fix it upon a pole.

Any person bitten by one of these snakes could see it and live. They had to face the symbol of their fear, place their trust in the God who was always with them; they only had to look upon the snake and live!

Their story is often our story. How many times have people given up their journey to a new life because the way was too hard. Men or women leaving spouses for a greener pasture, students in the middle of a long and hard course, sometimes feeling that quitting is far more promising than finishing what they had set out to do.

Sometimes it seems harder to go on than it would be to go back. John 3:16 has become so familiar, a code verse. The third chapter of the gospel of John begins with a Pharisee named Nicodemus coming to see Jesus under the cover of darkness.

In the earlier verses of this chapter Jesus had spoken on the necessity of being born anew and Nicodemus, taking it quite literally, could not bring himself to believe that someone grown up can be born again. Today's passage follows immediately after that one. Jesus elaborates on this 'new birth' by announcing three themes John outlines often,

- "the lifting up" of the Son of man,
- the sending of the Son as a visible expression of God's love, and
- the consequences of those actions for humankind.

Notice that Nicodemus came to see Jesus secretly and at night. Perhaps he simply does not want to be seen by his fellow Pharisees. Any how Jesus speaks directly to this contrast between the lovers of darkness and the lovers of light.

It is as much a challenge to Nicodemus to stand up and be counted as it is to us sitting here in this church in Lent of 2024 - to ensure that our own lives can be seen to 'be done in God'.

This God who caused the serpent to be lifted up in the desert is also the God who has lifted Jesus up. This action is the means whereby this God we worship who not only saves the lost, but also seeks them out, shows mercy, love and kindness to all of creation.

The heart of the gospel is contained in these verses. We cannot do anything to earn a right relationship with God, it is a gift and we received this only *through faith*. It is important that we do not get this backwards or that we do not begin to see faith as a work. In other words, we do not earn this relationship because of any works we do or even because we have faith. We are given as a free gift.

We have been on this Lenten journey for some weeks now. It is always nice, in the middle of any difficult journey to stop and take some needed refreshment before the final push to the end.

The season of Lent is no different. Today we center on the theme of God's grace in the midst of suffering and brokenness. We must remember that Lent, like the entire biblical story, is really about God's great love for the world that God has created.

The story of the people of Israel wandering around in the wilderness for an entire generation is more than an account of a group of people long time ago, it is our own story. Nicodemus is more than a fuzzy character from a dim past, he is you and he is me.

But, if the story of their unfaithfulness and their un-willingness to trust in the God of their ancestors is our story; the story of God's continued faithfulness is as well. How then do we respond to such a love? How do we seek to know this life we have already received as free gift?

**First:** We must be people of focus. This is much easier said than done. We cannot focus on the past. There are a great many things in our lives which seek to distract us from our spiritual journey.

In my own experience one of the easiest ways to lose my focus is by lamenting over and over what should have been done at some point in the past. Lent allows me to focus on how I journey into the future and allows me to leave the past where it belongs, in the past.

**Second:** we must face our fears and those things that keep us from being the people that God would have us to be. One snowy day in December of 1977 I had my first a car accident and I knew that I had to drive that same road again and again, despite my fear. Facing the past and the facing of fears is essential for many different kinds of healing

**The third:** and most important thing we need to re-discover on our Lenten journey is an experience of grace. The passages tell us about God's love and about God's salvation. We have been told again and again that salvation is a gift that should be received through faith.

This knowledge must move from the head to the heart and the soul so that it is truly part of our being, so that when the light shines it is seen that our deeds have indeed been done in God.

God wishes us to be the whole and complete people we were created to be, but that is because God loves us, not a condition of that love. We are called to enjoy that love just as we enjoy any gift that has been carefully selected for us.

**How God touches others' lives.** In the 1800's a preacher prepared a wonderful sermon he had intended for many men to hear to encourage them to give their lives to Christ. He arrived at the church very enthusiastically and was so disappointed when he looked at the pews and only seven or eight women were there to listen to him.

He went on anyway. Little did he know there was a young boy of about 9 years old who listened to him that day and was moved by his message. This young boy grew up and became a doctor, pastor and served as a missionary in Africa for many, many years. This young boy was *David Livingston*. This is how God impacts our lives. **"The word of God shall never come back void."** *Isaiah 55:11*.

The journey of Lent is a journey into wholeness. It is a journey where those things we fear the most can be the source of healing, strength and new growth. The journey of Lent is one where we can come face to face once again with the love and grace of God which is offered to as a free gift.

The journey of Lent is one which requires *focus, concentration,* and *determination* because there are a lot of things that seek to distract us from our goal. It is a journey which will take us to the cross and then to the glory of Easter which is the ultimate gift of God and the ultimate glimpse of God's marvelous grace.

In a moment we will be celebrating the Lord's Supper oh! What a marvelous opportunity to come to the altar with what ever fear we might have and exchange it for God's peace. "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*" **Amen.**