

Infra - 4 time
1) water
2) manna
3) quail
4) snakes

John - relates looking to believing

THE SERPENT

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson,
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA

April 2, 2000

"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.'" Numbers 21:8 "And 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." John 3:14

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

Suppose I had only one sermon to preach. Suppose I had only a limited time, say 15 minutes. Suppose I was speaking to all sorts and kinds of people including non-Christians, agnostics and adherents of non-Christian religions as well as long time church members. If I had only one more sermon to preach I'd stay away from peripheral matters. I wouldn't give advice about how to raise children. I wouldn't give opinions on the Palestinian conflict. I wouldn't preach on our human potential or how to have success in the world. In my years of preaching I've touched on all these things in sermons but if I had only one sermon to preach I'd concentrate on what's basic to the Christian faith.

If I had only one sermon to preach I'd lift up Jesus Christ. Just as Moses lifted up the Bronze serpent in the wilderness so that anyone who merely looked at it was healed, I'd lift up Jesus Christ and I'd say, "Just look at him. You don't have to make any theological affirmations. You don't have to understand everything in the Bible. You don't have to do anything but look. Just look at Jesus."

I'd lift up Jesus and say look how he welcomes little children and blesses them. Look at him touching lepers and welcoming outcasts. Look at him eating and drinking with sinners. Look at him casting out demons. Look at him stilling a storm on the sea of Galilee. Look at him feeding hungry men and women with meager resources. Look at him calling men and women to follow him. Look at him weeping at the tomb of Lazarus. Look at him angry with people who exclude the lost sheep of Israel. Look at him kneeling to wash the feet of his disciples. Look at him Risen from the dead and ascending to the highest heaven, Lord of lords and King of kings.

But above all I'd lift up Jesus Christ on the cross. Look at him on the cross. I'd point out the obvious: Jesus was crucified, not on a communion table between the pulpit and the baptismal font, but between two Palestinian criminals. Look at him! He's not like us. He is not a white, gentile, suburban American. He's a dark skinned Palestinian Jew. Look at him lifted up on the cross. Look at how different he is from us. Would he and his friends fit in or feel welcome in our congregation? Look at him lifted up on the cross! Would we even want him in our beautiful, clean, comfortable sanctuary? Would not the sight of Jesus lifted up on the cross deeply trouble us here in the sanctuary to which we come to get away from the pain and suffering in our lives.

If I had only one sermon to preach I'd point to Jesus Christ lifted up on the cross. Look at him! God so loved the world that he gave his only son. God loves the world so much it hurts him. Look at Christ lifted up on the cross and see God's love for Americans and Iraqis. For Democrats and Republicans. For capitalists and communists. For Barak and Arafat. For Milosheovich and Castro. Look at Christ lifted up on the cross and see God's love for heterosexuals and homosexuals. For pro-life advocates and pro-choice activists. For Red-necks and skin-heads. For people who love God and for those who reject God. For those who believe in Jesus and for those who don't know what they believe anymore. If I had only one sermon to preach, I'd lift up Jesus Christ on the cross, as Moses lifted up and the serpent in the wilderness and say to everybody, "No matter what you've done or failed to do, no matter who you are or who you've failed to be, look at that condemned Palestinian Jew crucified between two thieves and see how God, in Christ, has taken upon himself your suffering as well as your sin.

Some time ago I talked with a man who saw from my clerical collar that I was a minister. "Where's your church?" I told him and asked him if he had a church. "I used to. I went every Sunday when I was boy to Sunday school and church. I haven't been for years." He said it wistfully. "Did something happen or did you just get out of the habit?" He acted as though he had been waiting a long time for someone to ask him that question. After a long hesitation he said, "When I reached puberty as a young teenager I became disturbed by daydreams and

fantasies of men rather than women. I felt so ashamed of myself. My fantasies frightened and depressed me. I became so deeply depressed that I contemplated suicide. I actually became physically ill. I prayed. I read the Bible. I went to church. I sat there week after week and I heard the preacher vent his spleen at God's enemies including gay people. Every time I went to church I felt like I was being beaten with a stick. One day, I stood up in the middle of the sermon and left the church. I rarely go back. I feel much happier now."

His honesty and vulnerability frightened me. Yet I was deeply honored that he trusted talking to me. I don't know what I said in response. I think I mumbled something like, "I'm sorry. I can see why you dropped out."

My response has been troubling me for a long time. I wish I had lifted up Jesus for him to see. I wish I could have gotten him to take another look at Jesus, a Jesus he'd never seen in church. I wish I had pointed to Jesus touching lepers and welcoming outcasts. I wish I had lifted up Jesus on the cross and said, "He has borne your griefs and carried your sorrows and felt your shame and experienced your God forsakenness."

I wish I could have shown him Jesus surrounded by tax collectors and *so called* sinners who were coming near to listen to him. Jesus told three short stories in response to the religious leaders grumbling about the people Jesus hung out with. Jesus said to those tax collectors and *so called* sinners, "I want you to see God as a father waiting for his run-a-way boy to come home. See him standing at the window day after day watching the lane for his boy's return. See the old father running as best he can to welcome home his son when his returning boy is so far away that he's only a speck on the horizon. That's how much God loves and welcomes you. Again Jesus invites us to see God as a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine good sheep to look for one lost sheep. He searches until he finds that lost sheep but loses his own life in the process. That's how much God loves and searches for you. Again Jesus invites us to see God as a poor woman who loses a coin that all her neighbors feel is so insignificant that it's not worth looking for. But the woman searches the world, expending all of her resources, for her lost coin until she finds it outside of Jerusalem on a hill named Calvary. That's how much God loves even the most seemingly

worthless people (worthless in the eyes of others and often when we feel worthless in our own eyes).

If I had only one sermon to preach I'd lift up Jesus Christ. Just as Moses lifted up the Bronze serpent in the wilderness so that anyone who merely looked at it was healed, I'd lift up Jesus Christ on the cross and I'd say, "Just look at him. You don't have to make any theological affirmations, You don't have to understand everything in the Bible, You don't have to do anything but look. Just look at Jesus." He'll do the rest. He has done the rest.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,

God of all times and places, in Jesus Christ, lifted up on the cross, you opened for us the path to eternal life. Grant that we, being born again of water and the Spirit, may joyfully serve you in newness of life and faithfully walk in your holy ways; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.