

Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2:1-10, and John 3:14-21

When you look up at something it's usually something that is pretty spectacular. In less than a month we are going to be in the direct path of the total eclipse of the sun. To a majority of people that is something pretty spectacular. But as you know, looking up at it comes with a warning... don't look directly at the sun unless you are wearing an approved pair of glasses to protect your eyes, or you will be blinded. This isn't the first time Erie has experienced an eclipse. There was one in 1994 however the moon was too small to block out the entire sun so there was a ring of the sun's light when the moon covered it, and instead of total darkness it was more like dusk.

There are other, more common things that draw our attention upward... noises in the sky like helicopters, birds, the wind. But nothing like the Israelites in the desert experienced... nothing like looking at a bronze snake on a pole to cure us from a snake bite. It's hard for us to understand how God could send poisonous snakes to the people because they were complaining about how life was better in Egypt and so very difficult traveling through the desert. Yet it is God to whom they reached out, knowing that they had sinned and were suffering the consequences; knowing that God would hear the prayers of Moses and deliver them. Who would think their cure would come from a symbol of what had harmed them? Did you know that is where the medical symbol of the snake wrapped around a pole originated? It is called the Caduceus. "Have you ever wondered why is a snake, which is a symbol of destruction used ironically as a symbol of healing? Well, the answer lies deep sown in history when Moses, around 1400 BC, used the bronze serpent erected on the pole to cure the people who were bitten by snakes. The other reasons why serpent has been used is the shedding of the skin that indicated longevity and immortality." (Prakash, M., & Johnny, J. C. (2015). Things you don't learn in medical school: Caduceus. *Journal of pharmacy & bioallied sciences*, 7(Suppl 1), S49–S50. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0975-7406.155794>).

As Christians we are concerned with immortality. During Lent we are especially drawn to Christ lifted on the cross. Some of us have given something up or taken on an extra task of Bible study to draw us closer to God in these six weeks before the resurrection is celebrated. Have you been able to keep your pledge? It's quite difficult, but when we consider the life of Christ, not only that he suffered so severely on the cross, but that he came to live on this sinful earth from a place of perfection, that he was disbelieved and ridiculed by the very people who should have supported him, that he was betrayed by one of his closest followers, then we understand giving up something for six weeks to draw closer to God isn't such a big sacrifice.

We can learn from the Israelites who were complaining in the desert that it's the attitude with which we face this sacrifice that makes a difference. When we groan and complain about what we are giving up does it make a difference at all? When the Israelites complained, which if you've studied their journey through the wilderness, you find that seemed to be a consistent practice, it seems as though they were ungrateful for their escape from slavery. Which begs the question, are we ungrateful for our escape of slavery to sin? Their cure was lifted on a pole, as was Jesus, our cure from slavery to sin.

Jesus was in the middle of a nighttime conversation with Nicodemus when he spoke the words of today's gospel reading. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, Pharisees were the ones who kept the law so very strictly that they could not tolerate the least deviation

from it. However, Pharisees also believed in a life after their life on earth, possibly attained by strict adherence to the laws. Even though the Pharisees were seen as enemies of Jesus, they often invited him to eat with them, and they were the ones who warned him when his life was in danger from Herod. In that as Judeans they were looking for the Messiah the Pharisees would have been curious about Jesus and would have engaged him in conversation.

We have often thought that Nicodemus came under the cover of darkness so that he would not be spotted by others, but could it be that he was just unable to sleep wrestling with what God was revealing to him about Jesus? He starts his conversation by saying, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.” They then have a discussion regarding being born from above which leads into today’s text where Jesus tells him the son of man must be lifted up like Moses lifted the serpent in the wilderness. Nicodemus, knowing the Hebrew texts would have been familiar with this reference, but most likely would not understand what Jesus meant by this.

Paul in the reading from Ephesians we heard this morning was on the other side of the resurrection, and he explained it as the grace of God. He wrote, “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast”.

Jesus told us that God loves us so much that he was willing to give his only son as a sacrifice for our sins. Paul’s words explain that because of what God did through Jesus, the grace he has shown us, even though we were unable to stand before God because of our sin, now through Christ we are able to be lifted up to eternal life in God. Unlike the Pharisees thought that strictly keeping the law would give them eternal life, Paul has made it clear that it is not by works that we are saved, it is through our faith in Jesus. That, of course, doesn’t mean we are free to live a life of sin knowing that by asking for forgiveness we will be safe, it means we are to live the best life we possibly can, and when we slip up, we can turn to Jesus with repentance, a change of our ways, and be forgiven.

Jesus told Nicodemus that people loved living in darkness, not the physical darkness that occurs each night, or the temporary darkness we will experience during the eclipse on April 8, but the darkness of not believing Jesus is the light of the world, the one who came to draw us closer to God. It is an unreasonable thing for those who do not have faith to believe that Jesus lived, died, and was resurrected to provide eternal life, not in the darkness of evil, but in the city of God where light shines eternal. As strange as it seems to gaze upon a replica of that which was killing people, it is even stranger to consider that a man being lifted up to die on a cross would be the one who would be the savior of the world. But Jesus overcame death when he arose from the grave and in doing so, he overcame death for all who believe. He showed us how to live on earth in a way that reflects love, and he gave us the path to eternal life in Christ. Look up and believe!
All glory be to God.