

“LIFTED UP”

Numbers 21:4-9 John 3:14-21 March 11, 2018

We survived the time change and made it to church on time this morning! But let me tell you about Lyle. He was a member of the congregation. He was number seven or eight in a line of children—all then in their late 60’s or 70’s, all still living, and for the most part, all still living within reach of one another. He was a retired farmer. He was an avid fan of his grandchildren’s high school sports—so much so that after he died, they named a trophy after him. He is remembered as quite affable but also a little stubborn.

Lyle was also remembered as the only person known who refused to change the clocks when it came time to do so in the spring. He didn’t believe in Daylight Saving Time. Actually, many other farmers feel the same way and perhaps you know one personally?!?!

Well, this meant, of course, that from spring until fall, Lyle would have to think harder about ‘the time’ to be sure he didn’t miss worship, or an appointment, or a ballgame. The sacrifice must have been worth it for him, though, for his whole life he had been governed by the rise and fall of the sun. The actual time on the clock made no difference to him, if the sun was up it was time to go to work. If it was not, he was done with his day.

Although Lyle was out of step with the rest of us, he was right, of course. What difference does it really make to take an hour of sunshine and remove it from the beginning of the day, only to tack it on at the end? It is not as though daylight itself is actually being ‘saved’ then. We still have the same number of hours of light in our day. No, indeed, not a one of us can ‘control’ the light --all we can do is position ourselves in relationship to the light.

In our Gospel lesson today we hear a whole lot about light and darkness. Just like we can't control how long the sun will shine in the sky, we also cannot control the light John points to here. All we are called to do is stand in the light which has come into the world—this light that is Jesus.

At the end of last week's message I spoke a little about Billy Graham's death—truly a man who walked in the light of Jesus. This morning I would like to mention another man who walked in the light of Jesus, John Wesley, Methodism's founder. He passed away March 2, 1791. His biographer, Richard Green, writes eloquently about Wesley's death. He wrote, “in the home on the other side of the property, ‘with a simple ‘Farewell’ upon his lips’, John Wesley, in the 88th year of his age, passed from the scene of his great evangelistic toils on earth to the joy of his everlasting reward.”

A week later, early on the morning of March 9, a small group gathered at the tomb where Wesley's body was laid to rest. Beginning the service at around 5:00am helped keep the gathering intimate. Reports indicate that tens of thousands visited City Road Chapel (as Wesley's chapel was then known) the day before to pay their last respects.

The epitaph on Wesley's tomb is remarkable. It shares the story of his life and ministry. Describing Wesley as a great light that enlightened the nations and called the church to renewal, the inscription references his lengthy career of writing and work for the church. He “witnessed in the hearts and lives of many thousands,” the epitaph reads, and saw God's provision for his work to last for future generations.

Before giving the date and circumstances of his death, the inscrip-

tion concludes, “Reader, if thou art constrain’d to bless the instrument, give God the glory.” We might more typically say, if you feel compelled to honor the person, praise God more!

Two men of faith, preachers of the Good News, men of light who gave their lives to the service of their Lord: John Wesley and Billy Graham.

Today’s message is the fourth in the Rehab worship series and focuses on RECOVERY. The assigned lectionary reading for today starts at verse fourteen, where Jesus makes reference to an incident from the Old Testament, involving Moses lifting up a “serpent in the wilderness.” This leaves us to wonder what on earth does a snake have to do with God’s love for the world and God’s sending his son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life?

Perhaps some might think initially that this wilderness serpent is another appearance of the snake who tempted Adam and Eve, and draw the conclusion that this passage has something to do with temptation and original sin. But the serpent in this story is not a tempter. This snake is a savior. Because the story of the snake that Moses lifted up in the wilderness is not in Genesis. Rather, it is found in the twenty-first chapter of Numbers, which tells of the people of Israel journeying for forty years in the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan after the exodus. In the context of our series, we might say that the Israelites were experiencing forty years of rehab.

The book of Numbers is a story of lost faith. After leaving Egypt, the Israelites got held up making their way to the promised land when they were forced to detour in the land of Edom. The delay meant forty years of misery and suffering in the desert. It had gone on so long that not only were they losing faith

in the leader Moses, but they were losing faith in the Lord God. They began complaining loudly about the conditions of their wilderness experience:

“We were better off in Egypt. Why did you bring us out here into the wilderness to die? We’ve got no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food!”

If we back up a little bit in Numbers we quickly discover that this was, in fact, not their first occasion for whining and complaining. It’s not their second or even their third. It is at least the fourth occasion, and in each preceding time, God addressed their complaints in some way. But here they are at it again! And at this point, according to the Numbers 21 account, God is tiring of their complaints, because the book of Numbers reports that after this last incident God sent poisonous serpents among the people who were grouching. The snakes bit them, and many of the people died.

So the ones who didn’t die apparently went running back to Moses. They quickly confessed that they had sinned against him and against God. They threw themselves on the mercy of Moses and begged him to intervene with God on their behalf. So Moses went to God, and God told him to fashion a serpent out of bronze and place it on a pole. God told Moses that anyone who was bitten by a live serpent should look at the bronze serpent on the pole. And when the bitten person looked at the bronze serpent, he or she would recover and live.

Statistics suggest that most people who enter rehab don’t recover after the first trip. It usually takes multiple attempts, and multiple failures, before a person is able to leave behind the old way of life and fully embrace what it means to be in recovery. The word “recovery” is revealing in itself. It suggests that healing from something difficult or traumatic is an ongoing process that requires maintenance, perhaps for the rest of one’s life. We are going on to perfection, to

use Wesley's terminology that we talked about last week. Recovery takes vigilance.

So as we backed up in Numbers, I want to suggest that now, as we return to John's Gospel, that we back up to the first verse of chapter three. If we look at the larger context there, we can see that Jesus's mention of the serpent in the wilderness was part of a conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Nicodemus had come to Jesus seeking to understand his message and mission. Jesus would have known that as a Pharisee, Nicodemus would know well the reference to the story from Numbers and be able to understand it as a comparison to Jesus' mission.

Thus, when Jesus says to Nicodemus, "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." Nicodemus would have understood very clearly that Jesus was saying he was to be a healer to the Jewish people in some way.

Nicodemus would not yet have known Jesus would be hung on a cross to die. He would not have been able to envision being "lifted up" in the way that you and I can. But he understood Jesus' meaning: Just as looking at the bronze serpent on a pole enabled the ancient Israelites who were dying because of their sin to recover, so would looking at Jesus lifted up on a cross bring a hope for recovery to those who are dying in sin today.

The original sin of Adam and Eve was to desire to have the knowledge of good and evil for themselves, apart from God. They imagined they could do it on their own. They imagined they really didn't need God to show them the way to the truth. It is this original sin, of thinking that we can do everything without God, that leads to all the rest of our sins. So the first thing we need to do to begin to get

out of the vicious cycle of our sinful behaviors is to admit that we can't do it alone and to ask God and others to help us. And God has already provided the path to recovery!

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. For God so loved us that he gave his only son, so that when we believe in him, we will not perish, but will have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn us, but in order that we might be saved through him.

The good news is all we need to do is look to the cross. All we need to do to receive God's healing grace is lift our eyes and gaze into the face of our Lord Jesus Christ. All we need to do is trust that he is the one who can transform us, change us, restore us, heal us, save us. And then let him keep doing it.

Do you need to repent of your sins? Then go to the Lord in prayer and confess your sins and ask the Lord to help you turn away from your sins that you too may have life. Life eternal.

Please pray with me.... Lord, you love each of us so much that you were willing to sacrifice your son, Jesus Christ, on the cross for our sins so that we may have eternal life. Help us to repent of our sins today, seek your forgiveness once again and be redeemed for eternal life in your name. Amen.