

“Look and Live!”
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:1-15
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A couple of weeks ago, I received a surprise email from Claire Leary, the younger sister of my best friend growing up. I had not seen or heard from her in over half a century and I learned that she had been trying to locate me for several months now to inform me that her brother Richard had passed away from a sudden heart attack. For the first sixteen years of our lives, Richie and I were inseparable whether we were going fishing, playing sports, discussing girls, or just exploring the woods together. I last saw Rich briefly in the late 1970's when I had returned home to New Jersey from California to spend some time with my family. A few years earlier, he had graduated from Wesleyan University--one of our nation's finest colleges--where he was the captain of the basketball team. When I last saw him, he was working at a basketball clinic which would eventually become his life's calling as he would devote the rest of his life to teaching the sport to disadvantaged boys and girls. Claire related how at his funeral, hundreds were in attendance including several NBA players whose lives he had touched- inspired by more than his basketball prowess and passion for the game but by his deep love for the KIDS THEMSELVES and for having served as both a MENTOR and ROLE MODEL to so many of them. In response to her email, I told her how to this day, I still regard Richie as one of the most important influences in my OWN life and confessed how I wished I had HALF the character and maturity HE possessed back then and at such a young age.

One of my favorite memories of the two of us together took place when we were around fifteen years old. Richie and I had gone down to the woods at the end of our street to hunt for frogs and lizards. He had a terrarium in his basement and we were always looking for newts and salamanders and the like to stock it with. As we rooted around in the underbrush, I turned over an old log and boy did we hit the jackpot- there was a huge snake with half of his body down one hole and the other half down another with only its midsection exposed above ground. A recent Harris poll on “What We Are Afraid Of” revealed that 36% of all adults in the United States list snakes as their number one fear. There is a clinical word for this fear and it is called *ophidiophobia* and it afflicts 49% of women and 22% of men. Fortunately, among my OWN list of fears, snakes have never been one of them. I yelled to Rich to quickly get the coffee can as I reached down, grabbed it by the midsection and slowly pulled it out. Once I maneuvered the head into the tin, I was able to stuff the rest of it in and then use a flat piece of board lying nearby for a lid to keep it from escaping. With our prize contained, we then headed back to Richie's house to see what kind of snake we'd caught. Upon releasing it inside an old fish tank, we could see that it was chestnut brown with a series of darker broad bands crisscrossing the length of its three-foot body. Like the kids we were, we foolishly tried to pet it but each time, it would hiss and snap at us with its head. I actually thought it was quite beautiful.

When Rich's mother got home from work and saw what we had captured, she didn't quite share the same opinion; she said in no uncertain terms that she wanted that snake out of the house IMMEDIATELY. But rather than release it back into the wild, we decided to take it over to a pet store located less than a block away. When we walked into the shop with our terrarium in hand, the owner took one look at it and gasped, “Oh my god! Do you boys know what you've

got there- it's a copperhead and it's poisonous; you could have been seriously hurt if it had bitten you. You just better leave it here with me." After hearing that, it was with some relief that we left it in his hands. After school the next day, we returned to the shop to see what had been done with our snake. "You boys really missed all the excitement," said the owner. When I opened up the store this morning, I discovered that sometime during night it had escaped from its tank. I had to call the police who came right down. Once they located it, they dragged it outside and had to shoot it right there on the sidewalk." I had to admit I was a little proud of myself for catching such a dangerous reptile with little more than my bare hands and a rusty old coffee can.

Well our story this morning ALSO concerns poisonous snakes, but where we were LUCKY that we didn't get bit, many in our story were not quite so FORTUNATE. The Israelites were in the midst of journeying through the Sinai wilderness on route to Canaan, the land that God had promised them. However, impatient and exhausted from their years of wandering, they were now tired of their daily diet of manna which God had faithfully provided since the beginning of their exodus. Thus they complained against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in this wilderness? For there is no food and no water and we loathe this worthless food." Their enslavement in Egypt now looked a whole lot better than their new-found freedom with an uncertain future ahead of them. Furious over their lack of faith, God sends poisonous serpents among them and of those bitten, many got sick while others died terrible, lingering deaths. Quick to repent, the Israelites appeal to Moses, telling him, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us." Moved to compassion, Moses prayed as the people asked of him and God responded by instructing Moses to make a serpent of bronze and setting it on a pole so that everyone could see it. And why a serpent? Because in Israel, snakes were unclean and they personified sin. The people had sinned greatly by despising God's direction and rejecting his provisions. The brazen serpent raised high on a pole was to serve as a reminder to them of their terrible disobedience, that there were serious consequences for their actions. However, due to God's mercy, whosoever looked upon it would not die but live instead with the result that never again would the people grumble and yearn to return to Egypt.

But the story of the brazen snake doesn't end there. In our New Testament lesson from John, a very powerful and influential Pharisee named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish high court, comes to Jesus under the cover of night to learn more about this man. There is already great buzz about Jesus and his growing popularity and Nicodemus is intrigued enough to want to take a look. Despite all Nicodemus's status and learning, Jesus fails to be impressed. He tells him that he is the Son of Man who has come down from heaven and further, that he will be raised up in the same manner Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness so that "whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Later, he tells his disciples, "If I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all persons to me," to which John adds, "This he spoke, signifying by what death he would die" (12:32-33).

Thus, Jesus uses the metaphor of the bronze serpent lifted up on the pole to refer to his impending death by crucifixion. Here he is telling them that he must be lifted up on a cross, thereby becoming the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. But that "lifting up" had ANOTHER significance as well- it also suggested the beginning of his "exaltation." BECAUSE he remained obedient unto death, he who had become "accursed" would three days later be RAISED from the dead and take those first steps towards entering into his glory. As a result, his name would be exalted far above every other name.

It seems so strange that that which had hurt should also heal, that from a serpent should come both the poison and the ANTIDOTE of the poison. In fact, instead of sickness and death, the serpent has become a popular symbol for healing. For instance, in a former pastorate, there was a popular Christian counseling center located just down the street at the First Methodist Church which I would sometimes refer persons to- the Samaritan Counseling Center. It was hard to miss the sign out front which consisted of a snake curled around a pole. This is also true of the American Medical Association where since 1910, its logo has been the Staff of Aesculapius, a snake wrapped around a rod or branch. Aesculapius was a mythical figure--the son of the sun god Apollo--who became so gifted in the healing arts that the god Pluto accused him of diminishing the population of the Underworld (or Hades). While examining a patient, Aesculapius killed a serpent that had surprised him. He then witnessed another snake place magical herbs in the mouth of the dead one and restore it to life. So impressed with this power was he, Aesculapius chose as a symbol a serpent coiled around his staff.

While growing up in New Jersey, our family would travel to Florida every few years to see Aunt Charlotte, my father's cousin. During one particular trip, she took us to the Miami Serpentarium which for years had been operated by Dr. Bill Haas. This man, who finally passed away several years ago at the age of 100, had become renowned, not only for his knowledge and handling of poisonous snakes, but because over the years he had been bitten so MANY times, he had developed a special immunity against their toxins. Therefore, though still cautious, he was never afraid whether handling a cobra or a coral snake. In fact, his own blood became an anti-toxin and was shipped around the world for use as an anti-venom. The irony here was that over the years, his poisoned blood had become a source of healing and new life for so many who otherwise would have died a most horrible and painful death.

The same, however, could be said of Jesus Christ and HIS blood. Martin Luther once observed that, although Christ was sinless, he remained the greatest sinner who ever lived because ALL the sins of the people lay upon him. Well, the same blood that once represented the guilt of the world's sin both past, present, and future has now become the means of our salvation, the agent of our cleansing. As we used to sing in college all the time, "Oh there's power, power, wonder-working power in the blood, of the lamb. Oh there's power, power, wonder-working power in the precious blood of the Lamb." St. Paul testified to this when he wrote in his second epistle to the church at Corinth, "For our sake he made him (Jesus Christ) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21)

Nicodemus came to Jesus that night because he had heard enough about him and wanted to see for himself if he was as remarkable as everyone said he was. As we know, he wasn't disappointed. Since that day, millions of men and women the world over, like Nicodemus, have been intrigued enough to do the SAME. Regardless of their age or sex or educational level; in spite of their race or religion, nationality or creed, they found that all they had to do was direct their gaze away from themselves, to shift their focus from their own cares and problems and look to HIM instead. By beholding his face, by hearing his words, and by observing his actions, their hearts and imaginations became captivated by him with the result that they were never again the same. However, all they had to do was "look"--LOOK UPON HIM AND NOTHING MORE!--and HE would do the rest, just as those stricken Israelites only had to "look" in order to find healing from their affliction, or Nicodemus had come to "look" with the consequence that he eventually became one of our Lord's most faithful followers and ardent defenders!

The person who is considered by many to be the greatest preacher of the 19th century was Charles Haddon Spurgeon, often referred to as “the Prince of Preachers.” At the height of his fame, he spoke twice a week to the throngs who packed the huge six-thousand-seat Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, England. In his autobiography, he tells of what happened to him on the morning of January 6, 1850 as he was making his way through a terrible snow storm to attend a church service. When the snow and the winds became so fierce that he could go no further, he ducked into a small Primitive Methodist Chapel where possibly a dozen or so persons had gathered for Sunday worship. The minister of the church had apparently been snowed in so taking his place in the pulpit that morning was a very thin-looking man, someone who might have been a tailor or shoemaker by trade. He didn’t seem a particularly bright man—he had trouble just pronouncing the words correctly—nor did he command any of the oratorical skills usually expected of a preacher of the Word. Because he probably didn’t have anything else to say, he just repeated his text over and over again, a scripture verse from Isaiah chapter 45: “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.” As Spurgeon related in his autobiography:

The preacher began thus: “My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says ‘Look.’ Now looking’ don’t take a deal of pains. It ain’t liftin’ your foot or your finger; it is just, ‘Look.’ Well a man needn’t go to college to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. A man needn’t be worth a thousand a year to be able to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look. But then the text says, ‘Look unto ME.’ Ay, many of ye are lookin’ to yourselves, but it’s no use lookin’ there. You’ll never find any comfort in yourselves. Some look to God the Father. No, look to him by-and-by. Jesus Christ said, ‘Look unto ME.’ Some of ye say, ‘We must wait for the Spirit’s working.’ You have no business with that just now. Look to CHRIST. The text says, ‘Look unto ME.’”

Then the good man followed up his text in this way: “Look unto Me; I am sweatin’ great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hangin’ on the cross. Look unto Me; I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend to Heaven. Look unto Me; I am sittin’ at the Father’s right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! LOOK UNTO ME!”

When he had gone to about that length, and managed to spin out ten minutes or so, he was at the end of his tether. Then he looked at me under the gallery, and I daresay, with so few present, he knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eyes on me as if he knew all my heart, he said, “Young man, you look very miserable...And you will always be miserable- miserable in life, and miserable in death,--if you don’t obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved.” Then, lifting up his hands, he shouted, as only a Primitive Methodist could do, “Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothin’ to do but to look and live.”

Spurgeon then says:

“I saw at once the way of salvation. I know not what else he said,--I did not take much notice of it,--I was so possessed with that one thought. Like as when the brazen serpent was lifted up, the people only looked and were healed, so it was with me...When I heard that word, “Look!”... I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and at that moment I saw the sun; ...I had passed from darkness into marvelous light, from death to life. Simply by looking to Jesus, I had been delivered from despair, and I was brought into such a joyous state of mind that, when they saw

me at home, they said to me, 'Something wonderful has happened to you;' and I was eager to tell them all about it..."

My friends, what this account teaches us is that none of us needs to have perfect Sunday School attendance like a good Baptist, none of us needs to pray five times a day like a good Muslim, and none of us needs to keep all 10 Commandments faithfully like a good Jew in order to gain God's approval or merit his love. Faith is nothing more than humbly and sincerely coming to Jesus in all our brokenness and with all our problems, believing in some mysterious way that that lonely, dying figure on that cross somehow holds all the answers for us. Well the "good news" for us this morning is this, that we don't have to stare upon a bronze snake suspended on a pole to find healing as those Israelites once did. Rather, all we need to do is come to Christ with all our sin and sickness and disease and then LOOK TO HIM- that's all, for HE then promises to do the rest. This means that if our sickness is LONELINESS, then we are exhorted to LOOK- look upon that raised cross and behold the face of him who loves us with an everlasting love, of one who promises that he will never leave or forsake us. If our sickness is GUILT, then we are told just to LOOK- look unto him and know that through his death, our sins have been forgiven- now and for all time. If our sickness is FEAR, then we are commanded simply to LOOK- look unto him and know that greater is he that is in us than he that is in the world! If our sickness is DESPAIR, then we are urged only to LOOK- to cast our eyes upon him and know that as HE conquered death by his resurrection from the tomb, WE can confidently say, "O grave, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?"

Friends, if you direct your focus away from yourself with all your failures and difficulties, from all those feelings of guilt or fear, of despair or self-pity which never seem to let up and look to CHRIST INSTEAD, you'd be surprised to see how eagerly your heart will follow suit and discover how in him we find the answers to all life's problems and needs. Eventually, all those struggles that continue to be waged deep down within every human being, all those emotional and spiritual conflicts that would inhibit your hope and rob you of your TRUE joy, will eventually give way to something FAR GREATER. You'd see how when we turn our gaze away from ourselves and, alternatively, direct it toward Jesus, he stands ready to offer us the GREATEST GIFT OF ALL- that which is the gift of his UNCONDITIONAL LOVE, a gift rooted in an EVERLASTING RELATIONSHIP with HIM. It is a FREE gift- one we can only receive when we simply LOOK and nothing more. And if we DO take the time to look, we will NOT be disappointed for he then promises to take it from there and do all the rest. Let us pray...

Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, there is nothing we can do to merit your love. All you ask is that we come humbly before you and just "look" and you promise to do the rest. May we trust the words of that wonderful old hymn: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in His wonderful face, And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, In the light of His glory and grace." Amen and amen.