

Let us pray... Eternal God, gather your Spirit in this place. Open our hearts and minds so we may find you in all that we do. Guide our journey together, with you at the center. Amen.

If you are feeling a little unsettled after hearing the Old Testament reading this morning... Trust me, you are not alone.

I really struggled with the text from Numbers this past week... A disturbing story about God sending poisonous snakes among God's people.

That does not sound like the God we know, trust, and believe in.

The God we know, trust, and believe in, is a God who loves us and cares for us, a God who does not cause bad things to happen, but a God who is with us when bad things happen.

Which makes me wonder... Did God really send those poisonous snakes? Or did the Israelites attribute the poisonous snakes to God?

After all, the Bible was written by people... Specifically, by a group of people who were oppressed, marginalized, and defeated over and over...

A group of people who struggled for thousands of years... And in their struggles, they tried to rationalize and figure out why evil exists in the world, and why bad things happen to good people...

A question we still struggle with today. A question that never seems to have an easy answer, or any answer at all.

Which is hard to grasp... We want answers for things... We want to know why...

The lack of clarity is hard to wrestle with...

And lack of clarity, is also a part of our Gospel reading today...

Leave it to John, to begin with more questions than answers...

We read, "Jesus said, 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."

So, what does this mean, to have the Son of Man lifted up?

The vagueness of this passage, suggests that there is something going on here... Something more than Christ being lifted up on the cross...

Yes, it is part of the story, but it is not the whole story.

Because after the cross, Jesus is lifted up by the resurrection...

And after that, Jesus is lifted up again through the ascension, where he is seated at the right hand of the Father...

And yet, the symbol that is central to Christianity is always the cross...

Talk about confusing...

Especially since the cross during Jesus' time stood for something horrific. The cross was meant to dehumanize its victims, it caused great pain, and it only led to death.

Nothing good ever came from a cross... Nothing good until Jesus...

Jesus took the symbol of the cross and turned it on its head... In the cross where there was only pain and death, we now find life, grace, and love.

Which is similar to our passage from Numbers....

The snakes which were sent out to destroy, became the very image of salvation... God instructs Moses to create a staff with a bronze snake coiled around it, so when someone gets bit, they can look at the bronzed snake and live.

Notice, how God does not rid the world of poisonous snakes, but instead provides a way forward with them?

This is something we can relate to today... Since death is still a part of our reality... We can look to the cross, and remember... God provides a way forward even when things seem impossible...

By looking to God, we trust in the mystery of the cross, and what happens next...

Looking to the cross especially when life hurts...

The times when we are bit by metaphorical snakes, the moments that sting our hearts...

The times we feel the venom of hate in the words of others...

The times we are pierced by the relentless fangs of life, that dig in deep, and always leave a mark...

The times we see the poison in the world around us...

In all of these times we need to look to God, who is lifted up before us...

Because God changes everything...

From poisonous snake bites, to death on a cross, when God is involved, that which is painful, and even deadly, can become a source of life and our saving grace.

We don't need to understand it. We don't need to explain it.

In fact, we don't really need to do a whole lot... As we heard in Ephesians, "For by grace, you have been saved through faith, this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

A gift that frees us to love others as Christ loved us.

A gift all have been given because God so loved the world.

Love that is with us, still. God's love lingers in all places, even in our snake bites and in the crosses we bear. God's love is there to transform our places of pain and hurt.

And God does this both through the mystery of the cross and through God's very creation.

Take for example the medical symbol, it is a staff with a snake coiled around it... A symbol used for healing in the book of Numbers, and is also a symbol of healing from Greek mythology.

A symbol that is not about magical healing today, but embodies people who have gifts to share in the medical field. Who have developed those gifts with study and dedication.

Showing us that God continues to provide a way forward. Because God wants our world to be filled with love, hope, healing, and grace...

Because God alone is our saving grace... Grace that has been lifted up through Jesus and his love... Amen.