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John 3:14 – 21

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. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

This passage is one of those passages that leave us breathless. What can be said that could possibly add or reveal its message further? The imagery is precious to us all – images we use to communicate the very basis of our faith – the imagery of light, Jesus as Son of God, the expression of God's all

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encompassing endless love – the promise of eternal life – the gift of God’s grace --- all of these are in this short little passage.

However, again, some new light may be shed on this passage if we place it within its context. Firstly, this is a dialogue between Jesus and another – in the passage read this morning we only hear one voice – that of Jesus – but it is a portion of a longer encounter between he and Nicodemus – a Pharisee. Nicodemus has come to visit Jesus under the cover of night – undoubtedly because he would be ostracized by the other Pharisees if they found out he was talking with Jesus.

And what about that strange reference Jesus made about Moses and a serpent? Almost a throw away line – but really of great significance.

Especially since Jesus compares himself to this serpent. What’s with that –

The Son of God comparing himself to a serpent – the symbol of Satan?

Well that is a reference to a passage from the Old Testament - Numbers 21: 4-9.

The bronze serpent, lifted up on a pole, is a symbol of healing – whoever looks upon it will be healed – saved from death. Jesus is saying to

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Nicodemus – I am that serpent – I am the key to healing – I am the way to salvation – look upon me and be saved.

There are many parallels between these two passages – one from the old covenant one from the new. Those ancient Israelites had turned their back on God – had grumbled against His designated leader – Moses, and had lost their faith. In Jesus time God’s people had turned their back on Him – had grumbled against His designated leader – Jesus – even to the point of executing him – they had lost their faith.

For let us turn to the good news – in both the Old Testament and the New Testament stories the key to salvation is to look upon the symbol of God’s love – either the bronze serpent or Jesus.

But surely there is more to this requirement than just looking. Those tired demoralized wanderers in the desert could have all looked up at the serpent. Indeed, don’t you think everyone would have at least looked at it – if nothing else out of curiosity – what is that crazy Moses doing now? Yet was that all that was required?

Well we are told in that passage that the people had already repented of their sinfulness – they had gone to Moses and asked him to intercede with God on their behalf. They had initiated their own salvation. So perhaps, in this context all they need do is look upon the serpent. This sign from God that he is still with them and that he has forgiven them. Perhaps all that was needed was one glimpse and in that they would remember their covenant with God – would remember that he led them out of Egypt, that he had parted the Red Sea, and that he had provided manna. Perhaps that was all that this ragtag crowd of wanderers needed to renew their faith.

It is clear, however, from the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus that more is needed in Christ's time. People have not initiated their own salvation...indeed far from it; they do not even recognize what is being offered to them. Nicodemus must creep to meet Jesus unseen under the cover of night. And Jesus says to him, why should I speak to you about heavenly things – you don't even believe me about worldly things? They have rejected Jesus' teachings – they have rejected the Son of God.

The people of Jesus' day have not repented of the sinfulness of their ways – unlike those ancient desert wanderers – Jesus contemporaries have not even

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realized that they are sinful... they cannot repent unless they know what they must repent of. If the people whom Jesus is to save do not realize they need saving, how then is it that he has come. Our ancient Israelites asked Moses to intercede on their behalf – there has not been the same public outcry in Jesus' time. The people have not initiated their own salvation – God has initiated their salvation for them. Why???? Because he so loved the world.

It is love which is the key. Jesus says that he has not come to condemn the world but to save it. There is no sense that God is angry – there is here no sending of poisonous snakes to bite at the people's heels – to prod them into repentance. There is simply – and beautifully – God's unasked for and undeserved Grace – expressed through the sending of his only son.

So in this case, there is more needed than just looking at Jesus – the symbol of God's Grace – there has to be a new vision. A recognition that Jesus is the Son of God – that he is in his life the embodiment of the love of God – that his teachings arise from the Will and infinite Wisdom of God. That is how those around him are to see him – they are to look at Jesus the man –

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but they need to see in him the Christ – the Incarnation of God – God among us.

He had been sent to cast light into the world – to reveal the actions and thoughts of the people. But many refused to step into that light – to have their thoughts and deeds revealed for what they are. How appropriate is it then that Nicodemus – a leader of the Jews- is depicted as hiding in the darkness when he visits him. By greeting him at the door- and having this conversation with him – Jesus is truly inviting him in out of the dark.

And we here – two thousand years later – we are still offered that same invitation – to come in out of the dark. But for us it is more symbolic than literal for we must see our path to salvation not with our eyes but with our minds ... with our hearts ... with our souls... “Blessed are those who believe without seeing”. We must recognize the darkness in this world – not actual physical darkness – the darkness that Nicodemus used as cover – but emotional, spiritual darkness. The sort of darkness that results not when you close your eyes – but when you close your mind and your heart. That is the sort of darkness we must turn our backs on – the darkness created by

suspicion intolerance – the shadows cast by hatred and despair – the emptiness created by indifference.

For Christ is not to be found in the darkness – he is to be found – he is to be seen – in the light. The light that shines when eyes and ears – when minds and hearts are all open. But stepping into such light can be frightening.

Imagine yourself on a darkened stage. There cutting the darkness is a small concentrated circle of light. We must step into that spotlight – that small circle of light in an otherwise dark world. But there is a risk to stepping into that light. Once we are there – we are completely seen – completely known – completely vulnerable. All our blemishes ... all our warts ... all our shortcomings are revealed in the stark light. It might make us uncomfortable, we may even squirm, a little but we are no longer in the dark – we are in the light.

Once we step into that small circle of light – make that conscious act of faith – then another spotlight appears on the stage – it is a little further – we take a deep breath and step into that circle of light ... and so on and so on and so

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on. When we step from one to the other we have no assurance where we are going – all we know is that God is in that light – that is faith.

That is the invitation given by Christ in this passage – to enter the light – His light. To enter faith. And perhaps we can bring all our individual circles of light together to bathe that darkened stage – this darkened world with light.

We can share that light and make a new world – where darkness is banished and where light – Christ's light – makes all clear. Where we all can see clearly all that which is good ... beautiful ... joyous... where we can see God among us.