

Sermon: Shed a Little Light

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:1-21**

Barbara Brown Taylor once wrote that she often gives the impression that a ‘right relationship with God is part of a normal, healthy human life.’

Then Lent comes along. Taylor wrote that that’s when we realize that a right relationship with God is ‘no hobby but an all-consuming passion that offers no personal protection.’ She says, ‘It requires the willing sacrifice of everything one holds dear. It bears no more resemblance to normal, healthy human life’ than a cactus does to an apple.

‘But’ she added, ‘to live in the presence of God is to live fully.’ To live in the presence of God is to meet saints and angels, whose messages come ‘*scented with heaven’s smoke.*’ ‘It is not a safe life,’ she says, ‘but it is the only real life.’¹

The ancient Israelites found this out the hard way.

From the time they left Egypt, the people grumbled and complained about their situation in the wilderness. Today, they’re complaining about the food, but the basic issue was their failure to trust God and God’s agent, Moses, and so they spoke out against them both.

Looking backward from the perspective of the Gospel, Moses’ experience points to the future when Jesus was lifted up on the Cross, then again from the grave, and then finally to heaven. But this story has its’ own significance.

When the Israelites realized what they and their complaining had accomplished, they repented and asked Moses to intercede with God on their behalf so they could atone for their sin.

So, Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” It’s hard to believe that Moses didn’t say, “A bronze snake? Really, LORD?”

But the people went for it in some weird show of faith. Were they suddenly seeking God in a bronze serpent simply because now their lives depended on it? The snake looks like sympathetic magic at best with a little idolatry thrown in.

It turns out the bronze serpent shows up in Scripture in a few other places. In the book called The Wisdom of Solomon, it is explained that ‘the one who turned towards it was saved, not by the thing that was beheld, but by [God], the Savior of all’ (16:7-10). It was God’s mercy that healed them.² The thing worked.

But then, years later, in Second Kings, [Hezekiah] ‘broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it’ (2 Kings 18:4). It even had a name by then: Nehushtan. So, the bronze serpent made an impact but then it got out of hand.

The bronze snake reminds us that things intended for one thing can be turned to another use, in the way that modern drugs such as aspirin, which was first meant to treat headaches and fever, can turn out to have many other uses. It’s not a coincidence that the physician’s symbol, called the Rod of Asclepius, includes a snake as a symbol of healing.

Nicodemus is sometimes called the patron saint of all who have tried to make sense of the mystery and failed. The parallel to the passage from Numbers reminds us that God has been saving us for a long time, and that whoever the servant happens to be at the time, it is God who acts through them.

Here, it is Jesus, who seems to have infinite patience. When Jesus told Nicodemus that, ‘no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,’ Nicodemus said, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old?’ which is not what Jesus said at all, but it is what Nicodemus heard. Of course, Jesus was taking about a different kind of birth, a more spiritual kind.

The heart of the story, the teaching part for Nicodemus, is when Jesus said, ‘And just as Moses lifted up the serpent . . . , so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.’ We know that as the bronze serpent worked in the wilderness for the Israelites, so too will another symbol of deliverance work, which is our looking toward the uplifted Jesus for salvation.

God came into the world through Jesus in order that the world might be saved *through* him, whether it’s one leper or ten at a time, or finding one lost sheep out of 100.

The modern world has trust issues galore, and for good, solid reasons: the unfaithful and untrusting are often unreliable toward one another, in the way that one nation might never be sure about the intentions of another.

It's hard to rebuild trust once it's broken. Once bitten, twice shy, as they say.

It's also hard to resist the corruption of the unfaithful.

In 1934, protesting Hitler's attempt to destroy the church in Germany with Nazi ideology, a group of Lutheran, Reformed, and United Church theologians calling themselves the Confessing Church published a declaration that included this line: 'As Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, in the same way and with the same seriousness he is also God's *mighty claim upon our whole life*.'³ The Declaration as a whole, and it's not very long, was a theological poke in Hitler's eye.

They went public – very public – with their commitment to Jesus in a way that Nicodemus could not. They declared their faith in the light of day despite the danger.

In the world today, there are Christians who cannot declare themselves for Jesus for fear of physical harm or worse. And there are those who will stand up for Jesus even when it might be prudent for them to keep their heads down. God understands this reluctance. How would we respond in similar circumstances in our own time and place?

In the wilderness, even though the people spoke against God and Moses, God's steadfast love never wavered. And though they repeatedly broke trust with God, they always got a second chance, once they repented.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, desperately wanting to know more but worried about how it might look if he, a religious leader, came to Jesus openly. Jesus built trust with Nicodemus by patiently answering his questions and offering salvation.

And Jesus makes it clear that those who believe in him may have eternal life, but he also makes it clear that those who *do* what is true come to the light. Believing is one thing – it's a good start – but we have to *do* what is true as well.

In Lent, we save the good news until the end. In the meantime, God offers us a relationship and a faith and a life that may not be for everyone. But life with God is the only real way of life, one which even death cannot disrupt.

Amen.

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. “The Language of Lent.” *Journal for Preachers* 17, no. 2 (Lent 1994): 3–7.

² For the one who turned towards it was saved, not by the thing that was beheld, but by you, the Savior of all. And by this also you convinced our enemies that it is you who deliver from every evil. For they were killed by the bites of locusts and flies, and no healing was found for them, because they deserved to be punished by such things. But your children were not conquered even by the fangs of venomous serpents, for your mercy came to their help and healed them.

Wisdom of Solomon 16:7-10

³ <https://www.presbyterian.org.nz/about/statements-of-faith/the-barmen-declaration-1934>