

## **Look Up and Live!**

Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21

### **What is your favorite pet?**

What is your favorite pet or animal? I know many of you love dogs and cats. In my previous church, I led an animal blessing Sunday. People brought their dogs or cats, and I laid my hand on them for a blessing. I enjoyed blessing the dogs and cats. Gently putting my hand on those cute furry creatures was very pleasant. Of course, not all animals have fur. One youth member brought a lizard. I am not really a reptile guy, but I was o.k with putting my hand on the lizard and blessing it. After blessing the lizard, I told the church members I was glad that no one brought a snake for a blessing. I would not dare to touch a snake. I don't know why but snakes make my skin crawl.

When you think of snakes, what descriptions first come to your mind? Dangerous, poisonous, sneaky, or deadly. They would most likely be negative thoughts. But the serpent is a more complex symbol than we might assume. In Genesis, the serpent instigated the fall of human beings by tricking Eve. Thus, the serpent can represent temptation, the devil, and deceit. It can mean death, destruction, and evil. However, the symbol of a snake also has positive implications such as rebirth and wisdom. In today's scripture, we encounter a very unconventional symbol of the serpent.

### **The Serpent**

In Numbers, we once again see rebellious Israelites. As usual, they complained when their time in the wilderness was prolonged. "They spoke out against God and Moses: "Why did you drag us out of Egypt to die in this godforsaken country? No decent food; no water—we can't stomach this stuff any longer." They complained about manna, the blessing from God. To reveal their mistake, the Lord sent poisonous serpents, who bit and killed many Israelites. When they knew they were in trouble, they came to Moses for intercession. God's prescription was a mounted serpent set up in the camp. To experience healing, the Israelites needed to look at the serpent raised above them. Isn't it interesting that God uses the serpent as the symbol of salvation for the Israelites? The snake, which was the result of their sin, now became a symbol of salvation. They must see the image of their sin and acknowledge their wrongdoing to accept God's gift of life.

Facing our sin, especially our collective sin, is challenging, so many people ignore or deny their wrongdoing. I don't know if you have read the news that a Harvard Law professor's recent article has ignited an international uproar. During World War II, the Japanese empire committed many war crimes. One of them was that the Japanese military forced women and girls from occupied countries into sexual slavery. Most historians estimate that between 50,000 to 200,000 women and girls from Korea, China, and the Philippines were forced to be used at Japanese military brothels. However, Mark Ramseyer, a Harvard Law professor, rejected a wide body of research exposing Japan's war crime of sexual slavery. He argued that these women and girls willingly entered into contracts as sex workers. He rejected the testimonies of many victims and called them prostitutes. Many renowned historians and scholars have scrutinized his work. They have found that Ramseyer actually didn't have any historical evidence and distorted historical resources to support his argument. They have called for the retraction of the article

from the journal. But right-wing Japanese groups have used this Harvard professor's work as a justification for their denial of Japanese war crimes and have tried to alter the history.<sup>1</sup>

We can also discover similar attempts to deny the wrongdoing of our nation. The denial of racism is common. In 2020, the murder of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor sparked large protests against racism. Yet, racism does not anger everyone. Many Government officials have denied systemic racism and argued the real problem is "a few bad apples" in the nation's police force. Last year, I shared a story of Juhee receiving an insulting email. After Haven UMC put "Black Live Matter" on their church sign, a self-proclaimed devout Catholic man sent Juhee an email requesting that the sign be removed. As Juhee invited him for a deeper conversation, he sent an insulting email. One thing that struck me was that he called Juhee a racist because she had promoted only black lives and discriminated against other people's lives. This is not only denial of racism, but an attempt to alter the reality of racism. Until we honestly face our wrongdoing and sin, we cannot move forward, and the same tragedy will be repeated. Only when we face and acknowledge our sins, do we know our need for help. Only when we recognize we are in trouble... only when we acknowledge we need help... can we accept God's grace for salvation. That's why God wanted to make Moses a serpent of bronze, which revealed and reminded them of their sins. By looking upon the serpent of bronze, people acknowledged that they committed sin and they needed help.

### **The Cross: the sign of our sin and that of salvation**

Like this serpent, Jesus' mission to the world is one of revelation. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "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." We tend to see the Cross as the sign of God's grace and salvation. But the Cross also reveals our iniquity and sin.

Who hangs Jesus Christ on the Cross? Corrupt religious and political leaders who wanted to maintain their power; the manipulated crowd who didn't care about the truth but just believed whatever they wanted to believe; the disciples who betrayed their teacher and people who were silent about the unjust killing of an innocent man. This sounds familiar to us. Right? All these human sins are revealed through the Cross.

But at the same time, God made the Cross the sign of God's salvation. On the Cross, God's love is most vividly revealed to us. "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." (John 3:16-17)

The Cross reveals both our sin and God's grace. When we look up at the Cross, we face our sinfulness and brokenness. And at the same time, we encounter God's unconditional love for us. Only through the Cross, are we saved. We need to see both our sin and God's grace when we look up at the Cross.

Do you like fried dumplings? Do you know how a fried dumpling should be eaten? You need to eat the dumpling whole so that you can taste the flavors of the various ingredients altogether. If someone were to peel off the dough and eat each ingredient separately, you would say that that person had not really eaten a dumpling.

To experience God's power of healing and salvation through the Cross, we should receive whole gospel, not part of it. We need to look up at the Cross, face our sins and embrace its

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<sup>1</sup> If you are interested in this issue, please see, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/seeking-the-true-story-of-the-comfort-women-j-mark-ramseyer>

transforming power for our lives altogether. If we only see and romanticize the Cross only as the sign of our salvation, we will never be able to experience its real power.

### **Where is the Cross in our world?**

So, if you don't feel God's presence or if you feel the word 'salvation' is foreign to you, look up at the Cross in our world today. Where is the Cross today? When a father of three kids works 8 hours per day, 6 days a week, but still cannot pay for rent and food for his family, so his kids go hungry, there is the Cross. When a black mother fears and has to teach her boy how to walk on the street and behave, if a police officer confronts him, there is the Cross. When hate crimes targeting Asian Americans spike by 150% in Major US Cities as they have this year, I would say there is the Cross. When 80 billion pounds of food are thrown away each year in the US, while 42 million people suffer from empty stomachs each day. I would say there is the Cross. Each Cross drenched with tears and blood bears human suffering and agony. They also reveal injustice and evil in our society.

When we see these crosses, how do we feel? Sorrowful, angry, and overwhelmed, I would say. There are so many crosses in our society, and we don't know how to take care of them. We need help. We need a savior! We need obedience to the one who will rescue us from all that is killing us. We need to look up at the Cross and the savior on it. Look up at the cross!

During the Asbury outreach committee meeting, we talked about how we can serve our neighbors. By sharing plush American dolls with people with dementia and essential oil care-package for nurses, Asbury Outreach team has actively served our neighbors. When we discussed our community's needs, it became clear that food is an urgent issue for many people around us. We brainstormed how we might help with this. We don't know yet, but we also believe that God will lead our way forward as we take our first steps for God's mission. We may not be able to do it alone. In fact, we cannot fix the issue of hunger by ourselves, so we surrender ourselves to Christ, who will save us rather than thinking we can do it ourselves.

As we look up at the Cross and follow the lead of Christ, we will foretaste the joy of God's heavenly banquet through feeding and serving our neighbors. Isn't it the true meaning of life?

### **The Cross of Celebration**

Look at our beautiful 90<sup>th</sup> Cross. Each small Cross is our confession of faith and our gratitude toward God and our beloved Asbury community. Many pastors are impressed with our Cross! But let us not be satisfied with having a new beautiful cross on the altar. Let us look up at the real Crosses in the world and live with a big dream to see Christ turning the Cross of injustice and suffering into the Cross of salvation and joy!

We have 90 crosses here. In 10 years, how many more crosses would we like to have on our Cross? I dream that we will invite the neighbors whom we serve and ask them to decorate small crosses just like we have. Their crosses may then no longer be signs of suffering but signs of God's salvation and hope through Asbury UMC. We may continue to add them to our Cross each year for 10 years and more. How many more crosses can we get? How many do we want to have? What if we have 500 more crosses? How would you feel? What if we add a thousand or more crosses of joy and hope to our Cross... how would you feel? Some may say, "Oh, I would rest in heaven." But how would you feel if you saw our 90<sup>th</sup> Cross keep growing through our serving? How would you feel? Joy, relief, gratitude... that would be salvation for us too.

My beloved Asbury family. The first thing we need to do is face the Cross that reveals our sin and brokenness. During this Lenten season, let us face our sins and repent. But remember, God sent Jesus Christ to save the world. The Cross we see is the Cross of salvation and hope. Look up at the Cross and live! Look up and live as the people of God. Amen.