“Focus”

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

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***Numbers 21:4-9***

***4From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom, but the people became discouraged on the way. 5The people spoke against God and against Moses,*** ***“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” 6Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. 8And 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.” 9So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole, and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.***

***John 3:14-21***

***14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.***

***16“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.***

***17“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. 18Those 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. 19And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed******. 21But 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.”***

In 1992, liturgical artist Nancy Chinn (graduate of L&C in ’62) hung paper cut banners above the front of the sanctuary, over the choir loft of Old First Presbyterian Church in San Francisco. One of the banners was an image of a snake. Most of us were thrilled to have the art of such a prominent liturgical artist in our worship space. But there was a lot of negative feedback about the image of a snake in a church. Harkening back to the snake from the Genesis stories, the snake was the great tempter. But the bible also gives us the image of a snake as a healer. The American Medical Association has had as it’s logo a rod with a single snake entwined around it. Called the Staff of Asclepius, this represents its namesake, the Greek god of healing.

Our Old Testament scripture from Numbers is from the time of the Israelites in the wilderness. Today’s scripture is the last of five “murmuring” stories, a category referring to the stories of the Israelites murmuring against Moses and Aaron. Murmuring refers to speaking softly and low, and it’s usually an indistinct sound. Sometimes it refers to that sound produced by a person or group of people speaking [quietly](https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=8b94fdf9c54254b4&rlz=1C1JZAP_enUS950US950&sxsrf=ACQVn0_ZHEHY7enn5qduRGMloMPf0k70EA:1710056945623&q=quietly&si=AKbGX_okS0g0kR2PXn0TLBASIc0mPE8rbbgRzN9Euk-X6o4o9kKBB9qkwsJ2WD38RpIB2B8uBwitqdWi3dK0rpp_7IB60oMWQ81NYKRsvCqdhoGWLjetb3E%3D&expnd=1) or at a distance. You’ve probably heard of or seen videos of a murmuration, that collection of sometimes thousands of starlings swooping into flowing constantly changing shapes. In other words the Israelites just would not stop complaining. “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” Some of you might be familiar with an earlier text that tells of the Israelites complaining to Moses that there was no water, and Moses was able to produce water by striking his staff against a rock. For their complaints against God this time, God sent poisonous serpents among them. Those that were bitten died, so then the Israelites asked Moses to intercede for them, and pray to God. Then 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.” “9So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole, and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.” We know that this image of a bronze serpent on a pole remained an important part of the story of the Israelites, because later in 2 Kings 18, we learn about the reign of King Hezekiah, 500 years after Moses, and how he broke the bronze serpent because the people of Israel had made an idol of it. (2 Kings 18:4)1

What kinds of images do we often see in churches these days? We don’t see a snake coiled around a rod. We do see images that remind us of our particular story. Often there is art work of many kinds, windows that depict biblical images or even stories from our Protestant heritage. Part of the Protestant Reformation from which our denomination grew, was to remove anything that represented the wealth of the church. Churches like ours, built in the US in the 1950’s often will only have a cross as any kind of decoration. Each church and denomination will display the things that are important to their journey with God. Even the furniture we have is a nod to our journey with God. For example the theology of our denomination states the important of our baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and emphasizes the Word. A protestant church will usually have the pulpit, the font and the table prominently in view.

Most churches have a cross as one of the most prominent items on display – a cross with Christ still on it is called a crucifix and reminds us of the suffering and death of Christ. The cross used by a protestant church like ours, specifically a church that comes from the Reformed tradition, often has a cross like ours – a wooden cross without Christ, with a circle behind or around where the beams meet – which represents the sun coming up on Easter morning. This image represents the risen Christ. Some churches emphasize Christ’s suffering, others emphasize Christ’s risen-ness. The church we experience today is a product of these many many years of how societies have responded to the intersection of themselves in their world and God.

Our new testament text from the gospel of John begins by remembering the events of the wilderness when Moses lifted the serpent as protection from death by serpent bite. Just as the serpent was lifted up, so must Jesus be lifted up. That’s where the similarity ends though. A snake lifted up to protect someone from a serpent bite is a lot different than the meaning of the cross for Christians. The serpent was not an agency of eternal salvation, and there was no repenting of sins involved, and one only needed to gaze on the serpent. And the serpent bite was a medical disaster, not a society disaster. The serpent saved them from their worldly death from the venom. The Roman authorities were threatened by Jesus so they had him killed. It was a broken society that killed Jesus. One doesn’t just gaze at the cross, one believes in the power of the one who died on the cross.

The word faith does not appear in the gospel of John. Having faith, is a cognitive exercise. In the gospel of John, the word “belief” though appears more often than anywhere else. Believing in, is an action exercise. It’s not enough to gaze at Jesus as they did with the bronze serpent. One must believe in Jesus; trust in Jesus. When we read “For *God* so loved the world” and “*God* did not send his son into the world to condemn the world” we need to remember that it is the *same* God who promised to never again destroy humanity by flood; the same God who promised a great multitude to Abraham and Sarah; the same God who brought Moses the Law and the Book of the Covenant; the same God who brought the Israelites out of the wilderness. This same God who made all of those covenants with humanity, is preparing us for the ultimate covenant. The New Covenant into which we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own in our baptism.

What difference does it make to our lives if we trust in God through Christ, and are marked as and sealed by? All of these things are invisible? We baptize and declare our faith publicly, but it’s only to the assembled community. Do we just join the club and that’s it? I’m in so you, you just go have a good day. No. Our trust in Jesus must lead to action. Our identity as Christians isn’t meant to be invisible. The importance of connection through community is meant to happen in the worship community, but then expand to the larger communities that we are each a part of. 21 “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.”

There are many ways to make ones faith visible to others. Standing on street corners proclaiming the gospel is one. Knocking on doors with little pamphlets is another. In our tradition we proclaim the good news by being the good news. Not only as individuals but as groups. Where in your life can you say “I do this because my faith teaches me to…” or “I do this because the lessons of my faith story tells me to…” Besides just being a good and fair person, we need to consider others. By meeting their needs. By showing up. By being a voice.

Someone said to me once, if you meet someone’s needs you make them happy. But if you meet someone’s desires you bring them joy.

This Lenten season, as we look to remove obstacles between ourselves and God, as we look for ways to stop living in the wilderness, we ask ourselves if our faith makes a difference in the life of anyone else. We ask ourselves how is our faith visible.

Amen.

1In the third year of King Hoshea son of Elah of Israel, Hezekiah son of King Ahaz of Judah began to reign. 2 He was twenty-five years old when he began to reign; he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother’s name was Abi daughter of Zechariah. 3 He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, just as his ancestor David had done. 4 He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan.