

John 3:14-15

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.

Does everyone understand that first verse in our gospel lesson?

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...

What exactly is this verse about? Here is my interpretation. You might have another. For my understanding we need to go back to the book of Numbers, the fourth book in the Bible, where we find the stories about Moses. Specifically, we need to read the 21st chapter of Numbers. In it we find the Israelites who Moses led out of slavery as they journey to the Promised Land. As we start with verse 4 you will see that they have hit a rough patch.

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient 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.

Now I understand that when we have a bad attitude and share that stinking attitude with another that there are consequences. Feelings will be hurt. An apology is needed. Hopefully forgiveness will be given as the others see that our expression of a bad attitude is an outlier with our overall interactions.

We might also understand that if we have a bad attitude with God that we might miss out of the blessings that we can receive from God as we turn our back on God in our life. That makes sense. But what we find from these verses that we read in the book of Numbers I clearly don't understand.

It is one thing for me to miss out on the goodness that God has to offer me if I have a bad attitude towards the divine and turn my back on the sacred presence in my life. That I understand but I do not understand that God will purposely hurt us as the narrative in Numbers reports God did as serpents were sent to bite and kill people because those people had a bad attitude and said negative things about God and Moses. I might be able to deal with this narrative if it was meant to be an analogy of some sort. But if it is meant to be read in some factual manner then I just outright reject it. It has no connection with the God that I love and serve.

Having said that I need to share an affirmation about these verses; I do believe that God will provide us with a process to save us from ourselves from ourselves when we are walking down a destructive path. In this case it was bronze serpent on a pole. People looked to it and it reminded them to avoid all the poisonous attitudes that were killing the success of their journey to the Promised Land. The Israelites looked to the bronze serpent on the pole to be their best and experience the healing touch of God. Likewise, we look to the cross and remember Jesus on it to so we might be our best and experience the grace of God.

That's my interpretation of John 3:14. It might differ from others. Difference of interpretation is an aspect of being within a community of faith that embraces diversity. Now let move on to its more famous cousin, John 3:16.

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.

This is the God I know and serve. God is the One who provides us with help to avoid the deadly traps of life and gives us life enhancing options. Jesus is the ultimate life enhancing option. In Him we have eternal life. I really like what one commentary stated as it defined “eternal life” that is found in John 3:16. It reads, “Eternal” does not mean mere endless duration of human existence, but is a way of describing life as lived in the unending presence of God. To have eternal life is to be given life as a child of God. . . . Eternal life is not something held in abeyance until the believer’s future, but begins in the believer’s present.”

This is the God I know and serve. God does not purposely send snakes to bite and kill us when we are bad but God sends us possibilities to better our life when we are at our worse. Furthermore, God does not lift up the carrot of eternal life after our years on earth so we will be good and obedient now but God gives us carrots, apples, oranges and everything else we need to enjoy the goodness of life now and forever.

Now let’s apply all this to the real life issues we are exploring this Lenten season in this sermon series and in our mid-week studies. How might we enjoy the quality of eternal life as we participate within the United Methodist Church that is in the midst of prayer and dialogue as it prepares to make decisions for its future? As the United Methodist Church we are attempting to discern “A Way Forward” as we review our policy on the ordination of persons who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender and as we review our policy regarding marriage as well. I truly believe that if we can have discussions and make decisions around the issues of ordination and marriage in a manner where we do not perish but instead experience qualities of eternal life then we can be a light to the world as we provide an example of dealing with challenging issues in a healthy manner. The key is to keep our eyes on Jesus throughout the process.

A group called “Uniting Methodists” offers a process that might give us ongoing life as a people of God called United Methodists. You can do an internet search on “Uniting Methodists” for more details than I am going to share. Here is a bit of description of Uniting Methodists and their invitation.

They note that “faithful United Methodist Christians who love God and follow Jesus hold differing views concerning same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ clergy.” They go on to say, “Despite our differences, we have learned to live together and to love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, affirming the same historic creeds, attending the same churches, Sunday school classes and Bible studies, and participating side by side in mission and ministry. We are bound together in a Wesleyan understanding of God’s love and grace.

We believe that it is possible to be faithful United Methodist Christians and to disagree on how we interpret scripture regarding same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ persons.”

We join together, determined to forge a pathway through the current impasse by supporting the following affirmations:

Disciples:

Despite our differences, we are committed to remain a part of, and support, The United Methodist Church and to fulfill its mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Evangelism:

We are committed to both evangelism and social justice as essential to the expression of vital United Methodism.

Standards:

We accept and uphold the Doctrinal Standards and Theological Task of The United Methodist Church as stated in our *Discipline*.

Interpretation:

We believe our differences on the questions of same-sex marriage and ordination stem from differences over biblical interpretation, not biblical authority.

Let me break in at this point. I invite you to remember how I dealt with the interpretation of the Bible at the beginning of this message. It was not about same-sex marriage or ordination but it about the John 3:14 verse about a bronze serpent on a pole and Jesus on the cross. Then we looked back to the book of Numbers to understand the context of that verse. My interpretation of John 3:14 and Numbers 21:4-9 no doubt differs from others. Yet, as we differ on particular passages of scripture we can still agree that as we read scripture passages, like our lesson today, we are all trying to discern meaning and guidance for our lives. Now back to points 5 & 6 of provided by the Uniting Methodists.

Officiation:

We call for disciplinary changes so that clergy are neither compelled to officiate at same-sex weddings, nor prohibited from doing so.

Ordination:

We call for disciplinary changes so that annual conferences are neither compelled to ordain LGBTQ persons, nor prohibited from doing so.

This is a six point invitation from the group called “Uniting Methodist” as they try to discern “A Way Forward” as we live together as United Methodists.

Is it possible to be faithful United Methodist Christians and to disagree on how we interpret scripture regarding same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ persons? At St. Paul we will host opportunities this year to gather together to learn, listen and answer that question. As we gather we will be preparing ourselves for next February when about 1,000 representative members of the United Methodist Church gather in St. Louis to pray, dialogue, listen and finally decide our guidelines for ordination and marriage.

If we can have discussions and make decisions around the issues of ordination and marriage in a manner where we do not perish but instead experience qualities of eternal life then we can be a light to the world as we provide an example of dealing with challenging issues in a healthy manner. Our world need that. The key for us is to keep our eyes on Jesus throughout the process.

Yes, God loves the world.

Yes, God came to us through Jesus.

God did this so we might work through our challenges
in a manner that gives us life, now and forever.

That is one of my interpretations of John 3:16.

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.