

“Receiving God’s Provision”

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Today’s gospel lesson is taken from the book of John, chapter 3, verses 14 through 21. I’ll be reading from the *Common English Bible*. 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 is God’s word for God’s people. Thanks be to God.

Let’s pray. God of love for the whole world, you created us to love and to be loved. Move in us today to receive forgiveness and to forgive others. The “lifting up” of Jesus on the cross brings us face to face with how we have often rejected your provision—all different kinds of provision—for ourselves and for others. We can have a stubborn refusal to accept your ways We are a community, and the fundamental need for us to be one with each other needs to be embraced—for it brings us fullness of life. Open our hearts we pray. Amen.

The seven verses that were read are called a pericope. They're a small selection and extract from a book in the Bible. You've heard some of the verses numerous times in public places—especially John 3:16. Some things in our lives can become so familiar to us they can go in one ear and out the next. The more familiar something is the easier it can be to not pay attention to it or just glide over it and say, “Oh, I know that verse. I memorized it when I was 5 years old.” Knowing that, we should pay closer attention to it.

These verses are part of a conversation that occurred between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Verse 4 is taken from Numbers 21. Jesus says to Nicodemus, “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.”

The people were complaining against God and the Lord's anointed—Moses. They cried out, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” God had given the Israelites manna from heaven, and they hated it. You could say they hated God's provision and Moses was part of that provision.

They wouldn't stop complaining against Moses. So God sent poisonous snakes that caused some to die. But the people could be healed after having been bitten if they would just look up at the serpent on the stick. The people who lived looked up to the serpent. They repented and confessed their sins against God.

Bottom line is this—the people rejected God's provision—they hated the manna God sent and some of them distained Moses. What was this serpent on a stick? It was a “type” of Christ. If the people would look to the serpent they'd be healed and saved. Jesus explains it, “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.”

An important focus about this story from Numbers is that it's in a communal setting; Christianity is all about community. It's also about some *group complaining*. The Israelites rejected the provision of God—the manna from heaven and their spiritual leader Moses. When they complained, God dealt with their sin. When they repented, God healed and saved them. God can be compared to a snake in this story; it's an odd comparison. When the people were stubborn and rebellious they died. When they repented and looked up to the serpent, a “type,” God sent a saving snake—Christ.

Now, the familiar verse we all know, John 3:16. Let's all say it together. **“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.”** Good job! Interestingly enough, when we decide to come to the Lord and get involved in the life of the church—it all happens in community. We don't do it alone. We don't go through confirmation alone, we don't serve on committees alone, and we don't worship alone. We do it together. We're a Christian community.

John 3:16 says that God loved the whole world so much that he sent his son to die for it. What gets me about this is that God doesn't even ask us if we want his son to die for us. He just does it—doesn't ask our opinion or permission—doesn't confer with us in any way. God leaves us completely out of his decision making. Question is how would it make you feel if someone gave their life for you?

Now, imagine if God would've made the giving of his love for the world conditional? Say, conditional with how we think, or what we do, or what we don't do? Or what if there would've been some earning aspect to God's love? Geez, if his love was conditioned on our behavior none of us would get saved! We could've said, “God, this is just the way I was raised to think! My parents have a horrific

temper and so do I! But no God poured out his love in a way that has nothing to do with us. It's not based on us at all; it's based on who God is, and "God is love."

We can't change the fact that God loves us, we're powerless in that. No wonder this is the world's most popular Bible verse, because it is good news! We can still reject God's love; we can run from it, and we can refuse to be transformed by it. We can do anything we want with it. Still it stands, that God just went and did it. He made his love complete and unconditional. That means we have lost control! We can hate the love God wants to give us, but it's still there—waiting for us.

Both stories we've talked about, the serpent on the bronze stick and the giving of God's son—both function to save God's people *and it's all done in community*. Why is that? One reason is this. When we finally decide to put down roots in a church community and get involved in the life of the church—we *have* to learn to love, forgive, and continue with our brothers and sisters *if we intend to stay there*. We're placed right smack dab in the middle of a community that God has formed for us. Oh, I guess we can switch churches, and run here and run there because there's a person or persons we just can't put up with.

But guess what; those same personalities are going to be at another church. You're not running from "that person" you're running from having to confront who *you are as a person*. God's love is meant to teach us how to be and stay in relationship with each other. How to let our anger go. How to say it's my fault or how to say I'm sorry. We learn to eat humble pie. We eat crow, and it sure is foul-tasting and emotionally hard to swallow. But we change, and we allow ourselves to be transformed by the Holy Spirit. We become more like Christ.

The power of this “lifting up” of the serpent and the “lifting up” of the Son of Man is this. In both stories, God’s provision is available. In the wilderness story, in order to be healed and saved, the Israelites had to look directly at the consequence of their stubbornness and unwillingness to accept God’s provision. They couldn’t run. If they wanted to be healed they must look up to the serpent on the stick. Now remember, the Israelites were a community when they were wandering in the wilderness. They were learning to love God and each other.

John 3:16 happens within a community too. Salvation is not just an individual journey; it’s received and learned in a loving Christian community. The challenge is that we’re not always as loving as we need to be; it’s a process.

Just like the wilderness story, John 3:16 confronts our stubborn rebelliousness. The “lifting up” of the crucified Christ confronts us with our own rejection of God’s provision. Too many times we don’t accept God’s loving ways as we interact with each other because of our stubborn rebelliousness. We don’t want to give that person love and forgiveness, and we don’t want to let it go either. It’s a refusal to accept God’s ways. But the only way we can be changed, healed, and saved is to obey God, and it happens in community.

The Israelites looked up and were healed. **We** look up to the One who was crucified! Let’s let go of our stubborn rebellious ways. Let’s learn to receive the provision of God’s ways and learn to love and forgive each other.

Let’s pray. God, we learn your ways of love and forgiveness as we’re centered in the Christian community you’ve placed us in. This is how we learn your love. Help us to stay in relationship with each other—to receive and give your unconditional love. God continue to love us, save us, and hold onto us. When we’re tempted to run away from your love, empower us so we can turn to one another in love. Amen.