

“High and Lifted Up”

Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:4, 8-10; John 3:14-17, 19, 21

I know that you have heard me speak of one of my favorite topics when it comes to pre-marital counseling: the ‘holy ratio.’ That in terms of the importance of communication, it is good to remember the ‘holy ratio’... that God created us with 2 ears and one mouth, and therefore we should *listen* twice as much as we *speak*. Well, when it come to ‘ratios,’ I was thinking this week... yes, I do occasionally ‘think’... when I have time... about the comparison between the front windshield and the rear-view mirror. The former through which we look **ahead**. And the latter by which we see **behind**. And how much BIGGER the front windshield is compared to the rear-view mirror. Indicating, of course, how much more important it is to look FORWARD than to look BEHIND. Not that the ability to look back isn’t valuable... but not nearly so as looking ahead.

It was this relationship of looking ahead v. looking back that came to mind as I considered the passages today from the Old and New Testaments. That, in general, it is important to see where we have **been** in our history of faith, as we consider the timeless truths of the Old Testament. BUT, that is even more important that we see where we are **going** through the lens of the New Testament. As we look **behind**, be it in a car or in the Bible, we can avoid something ‘sneaking up’ on us that might cause us **harm**. But we surely must not neglect looking **forward**, lest we suffer much **greater harm**. By being aware of that which we have **passed**, it can help us to be ready for what is to **come**...

What made me think of this was the metal serpent that Moses was instructed to lift up on a wooden pole. It was modeled after the real-live ones whom God has sent to punish the ‘trash-talking’ Israelites. Snakes that administered the penalty of death for the people’s waywardness and rebellion. Snakes that were usually associated with sin, disobedience, and death. (Adam and Eve – spiritual forces of evil?) (Jesus- **“brood of vipers”**- human evil?)

Given this association with the penalty for disobedience to God... **death**... it made sense that the Israelites would be given this symbol which would lead them to **life**. As they looked

back on the sinful ways that they acted toward God, and His chosen leader Moses, they could look *forward* to being saved by God from the punishment they deserved. It is important to remember one's **past** actions... but only if they are used to shape a much more promising **future**. "*Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat its mistakes.*"

Recognizing the more negative meaning of the serpent, that makes understanding Jesus' use of it with relation to Himself a bit more of a 'slithery slope.' ☺ But as we look a little deeper in to the widespread usage of serpents in ancient traditions, we find that aside from them being a symbol of **death** and **danger**, the snake was also used as a symbol of **fertility**, **healing**, and **LIFE**. Fertility, which leads to **birth**. Birth of a creation often in need of **healing**. Healing and wholeness which leads to a full **life**. So maybe that serpent analogy to Christ was NOT so far-fetched...

And so, for the next few minutes, let us take a closer look at how the examples of a serpent and a Savior help us to both consider the past of where we've been, but more importantly, of where we are going. Of how we are not to only look down in shame over what has happened behind us, but more importantly, rejoice in what lies ahead... a future in which we should hold our heads '**high and lifted up.**'

Whether we keep our heads lifted high before God, or hang them in shame, might be considered to come down to a matter of how well we OBEY God... or how we DIS-OBEY God. It's kind of like I was telling my (beautiful!) Grandchildren this past week... things will ALWAYS go better for you if you obey your parents. And hey, this is not simply some old 'fuddy duddy' grandparent talking. God makes it clear how important it is to listen to one's parentals. In the 10 commandments, as you Bible scholars now, it is divided up into two parts: how to treat GOD, and how to treat ONE ANOTHER. And what is the FIRST one with regards to our human relationships? "**Honor your father and your mother.**" (Exodus 20:12a) AHEAD of murder, adultery, stealing, false witness, or covetous behavior. AND the only one that comes with a resultant condition: "... **SO THAT your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.**" (Exodus 20:12b) Soooo, if obeying your *human* parents is important, how much MORE important is it to obey the original 'God-parent?' Unfortunately, too often we put that

little 'prefix' on, and DIS-obey God. Interesting, isn't it, what a difference three little letters can make...

Aside from its use as a prefix, how many of you remember that somewhat dated colloquial expression, to 'DIS' someone? This term actually did make it to Webster's. Of course, it comes from the word 'DIS-respect.' To treat with contempt; to insult, criticize, to find fault with. To use in a sentence: *"The Israelites dissed both God and Moses... big-time!"* Using that word 'dis' in the more common form as a prefix, rather than a verb, I would suggest three ways in which those ancient believers... and we 'NOT-so-ancient' ones... 'DIS' our God. We can 'DIS-HONOR' God. We can do a 'DIS-SERVICE' to God. And we can 'DIS-TRUST' God. AND... that by the same token, these Scriptures can also lead us to **Honor, Serve, and Trust** Him.

First, we can **Dis-Honor** our Lord. Particularly with our **Words**. We can certainly learn from the poor example of the Israelites. As we considered that definition of 'DIS,' most every word described the outpouring of their 'stinkin' thinkin'. ☺ 'to insult, criticize, find fault with.' And not only to their human leader, but their Divine One! And God did NOT take too kindly to such verbal abuse of His servant Moses, or of Himself, for that matter. They paid a pretty stiff price for their 'contempt'— to be 'condemned'... to DEATH!

Now I SURE hope that God is not going to mete out such a sentence for criticism and fault-finding TODAY! If He DOES... well, there's a LOT of us in trouble. But Moses certainly displayed a very gracious, loving way to repay the 'dishonor' that his countrymen showed him. Remember? *"He prayed for the people." (Numbers 21:7)* Pretty 'honorable' way to react to such criticism, eh? And, Jesus also speaks to the honorable, **gracious** manner in which God treats His people: *"For God didn't send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."* (John 3:17)

God's love for us is filled with grace, with honor, with unconditional love. One that does not treat us like we deserve. As servants of the living God, like Moses, how do WE in turn treat others? Do WE become impatient, complaining, speaking hurtful words against one another... OR do WE 'honor' one another? How do you and I make others feel 'high and lifted up?'...

We also can 'DIS' on God by doing Him a '**DIS-service.**' Ways that we do HARM to the witness of God's **love** and **grace** in Jesus Christ. By this I will refer to Paul's words in Ephesians:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is NOT your own doing; it is the gift of God—NOT the result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9) You may have heard me refer to an Acronym for **G-R-A-C-E**: *“God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.”* CHRIST’s expense. NOT our own. UNLIKE with any other human being’s response and affection, there is NOTHING we can do to merit God’s salvation. ***“It is the gift of God.”*** We are NOT saved by the number of church services we go to, or the number of Bible studies we attend, or the number of community/church activities we go to, or number of committees we serve on. Our salvation, unlike anything in our world, it NOT **‘performance-based’**... but **‘God-graced!’** All of our worship, study, and service is to come OUT of our relationship with God. Not to bring us INTO one...

The reason that I am such a strong proponent of spiritual renewal retreats like Pilgrimage is NOT because I think that going there gets you ‘brownie points’ with God. It’s NOT to show God ‘what a good boy/girl am I.’ But rather, to be reminded of just how ‘good’ GOD is... ALL THE TIME! All that we do in **service** to our Lord is NOT about ‘elevating’ ourselves in God’s eyes, or man’s... but rather to, in the words of Jesus, ***“so that it may be clearly seen that (our) deeds have been done in God.”*** All that we do should strive to keep the Name of Jesus ‘High and lifted up!’

And finally, we must be careful not to **DIS-TRUST** God. We have heard on any number of occasions how those grumbling Israelites did nothing but gripe at Moses, and God, complaining time after time to God, ‘WHY did you bring us out here in the wilderness? Why did you take us away from the ‘security’ of our bondage to the Egyptians?’ And my personal favorite, from today: ***“And we detest this miserable food!”*** (I seem to recall having heard that on some hospital visits I’ve made...) But in our criticism of the ‘wandering Jews,’ we had best be careful not to look in the mirror. For we too can get pretty testy with God over the ‘wilderness’ we wander in... personally, or as a body of believers. We too can yearn for years gone by, or become complacent in our cozy little ‘holy huddles.’ We too can ‘major in the minors’... be so concerned about thermostats or music selection, while oblivious to mission, spiritual growth, and evangelism. Or, we can focus so much on ‘DE-ficiencies,’ we fail to make use of our ‘PRO-ficiencies.’

In Paul's reminder that we are saved by faith, and not by works, we should not forget the last part of that passage: ***"For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."*** (Ephesians 2:10) ***"For we are what he has made us"***... warts and all! We are EACH made in the image of God. Scary, eh? Were we made just to be in our own little worlds, happy because 'everybody likes us there?' No, each one of us... no matter your age or stage, no matter your personality type or Biblical literacy... was ***"Created in Christ Jesus for good works... which God (has already) prepared beforehand to be our WAY OF LIFE!"*** Each one of us should ask ourselves, what 'good works' am I doing that bear witness to the 'Good News.' How is my 'way of life' building the Kingdom of God? How does my everyday, walking around LIFE demonstrate a **TRUST** in God, and in His Son Jesus Christ?

In this season of Lent, it is these sorts of questions that we should ponder as we drive down this 'highway of life' God has put us on. As we look in the rear view mirror, let us see those ways that we have 'dissed' our God. Those ways that have turn our back on Him, and on His mission. But let us keep an even greater eye out through the 'front windshield.' Let us always be on the lookout for ways to **Honor God** with our **Words**; **Serve Christ** with our **actions**; **Trust** in the **Spirit** to give us **faith**. As we look down the road, preparing ourselves for a trip down the 'Via Dolorosa' (the Way of Suffering) may we keep our eyes on the Cross... where we find **Hope** and **Love** **"High and Lifted Up."**