

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Wilderness Stores: So Loved by a God Who is Able.”

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Numbers 21:4-9

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After today, we get to leave this wilderness, this bar mid bar, behind us. It has been a journey for Israel, filled with so much anxiety and fear and loss. This series has caused us to reflect on our own anxieties, our own fears, our own losses and ultimately our own wilderness experiences. Hear now, God’s word for you and me.

Numbers 21:4-9

From 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. The 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.” Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The 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. And 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.” So 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.

How many of you knew that this was the passage that provided the context for the most famous verse of the Bible? According to a 2022 article in “Christianity Today”, John 3:16 has had the most searches month by month in the entire globe at 2.1 million searches a month. In John 3, Jesus is talking with a very well-known Pharisee named Nicodemus, and in his conversation, Jesus references our Numbers 21 passage. Does it not make you wonder, what is it about this passage in Numbers 21 that makes Jesus mention it in John 3:14&15 setting up v.16 to be so sought after by humankind? It piques my interest. *And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that 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.*

We find in Numbers 21 that yet again the Israelites complain and grumble, real shocker, but you would likely be complaining too if you were in their shoes. What sets their complaining apart from previous complaints is that this time they make the statement “we detest this miserable food.” That doesn’t seem out of the ordinary to us. I can think of foods that I detest too: namely Mushrooms, it’s just a horrible texture. Jackfruit is also detestable to my pallet. The issue is that the food Israel was referring to was the heavenly bread, called manna, that God provided to them 6 days out of the week. To survive, the body needs food. God provides food. They detest God’s food. They therefore detest God’s provision and blessing. Have you ever complained so often about something that a blessing from God becomes detestable to you? Have you become resentful about a job? Or have you overheard folks who complain about their spouse all the time? With every utterance of bitterness and resentment, that blessing begins to resemble a wasteland and becomes life taking rather than life giving. Be wary of the habit of complaining while having no solution to offer, but specifically when complaining about the provisions of God.

As a result, venomous snakes with a burning poison overrun the Israelite camp and they find themselves dying a very pain-filled death. Nonetheless, God doesn’t forget His covenant with Israel and He never stops loving them,

so after Israel's repentance and prayer, God provides an unusual manifestation of his grace; an antidote to save life in the form of a bronze metal snake lifted high on a pole, and the only requirement was for each individual to look upon it and they would survive the poisonous snake bites.

What does it mean to look toward something for help? Does it not mean that you put your hope in something and that you believe that such a **thing is able to save you**? When you dial 911 you put your hope in the professionals trained in medical first aid, and you believe that **they are able to** save you in your time of need. By looking to the metal snake on a pole, Israel was once again looking to God's provision and believing that **God was willing and able** to save them from imminent death. When a child gets hurt and starts crying, they look to their parents trusting, indeed knowing, that their parents **are able to** help them in their time of need.

"...so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Lifted up in such a way that all people can look to him. By believing in the Son of Man (a title Jesus adopted from the book of Daniel and applied to himself), an individual is trusting **that God is willing and able** to save you from imminent death in your time of need. *"For God so loved..."* By pointing to this Numbers 21 passage, Jesus is highlighting that the whole world is **so loved by a God who is able to save**. To make it personal, **you are so loved by a God who is able to save you; still, it does require each individual to look at Jesus. Trust Jesus. Believe Jesus. Receive Jesus as your divine provision in the wilderness.** C.S. Lewis in "A Grief Observed" said about belief: *"You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong as long as you are merely using it to cord a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn't you then first discover how much you really trusted it?"* Do you really trust Jesus as a matter of life and death?

In a few moments we will include as part of our worship today, the reception of our confirmands and the Baptism of two souls. Each of these young people will be standing before the congregation affirming that they look to Jesus; affirming that they believe **God so dearly loves them** and affirming that they believe **God is able to save** them, making them safe and sound from the wilderness of sin, evil, and the dominion of darkness. Let their faith encourage your own faith.

Isn't it telling that the most popular verse in all of scripture is one about God's love, God's provision of salvation through His son, Jesus, the Son of Man? Perhaps it is because there are so many people waking up and finding the wanderlust of the wilderness has worn off. Now they're realizing **"I can't live like this anymore"** and they're looking for help. Looking at anything and everything wondering what will work, what can actually save them and what will make a difference in their lived experience of life?

On this Palm Sunday, it is curious that the crowds of Jesus' day hailed him as King upon his triumphal entry into Jerusalem while he rode in on a donkey. Yet all it took was the complaints from the Pharisees to spread throughout and infect the crowd, so that just a few days later they would shout, *"crucify him."* Sounds a lot like, *"we detest this heavenly bread!"* Jesus, the bread of life given by God, was now detestable in the eyes of those who previously shouted Hosanna.

Friends, may we be people with grateful hearts. May we look to Jesus, the image of God's love for the world, and receive the unusual healing God has for us who have been walking in darkness. May we, as snake-bitten people too, point to Jesus lifted high on the cross that others might look to Jesus and experience life and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.