

***Thy Will Be Done***  
***Sermons for the Lenten Season***

**God's Will and Entering the Light**

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

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My wife asked me last week what my most frequently recurring dreams are. I think this was an exercise for her ESL class. So I thought for a moment and concluded that my most frequently recurring dreams are about being caught unprepared for some important occasion. You're all gathered, and I'm supposed to deliver a sermon. Yet I'm totally unprepared. In my dream, I'm trying to decide whether I should I wing it and hope no one notices or quickly run back to my study and pull something off my computer. But there's no time to run anywhere! A similar version of that dream places me back in college. It's exam time, and I haven't even looked at the material. I'm totally unprepared. These dreams create an acute sense of anxiety, that I'm going to perform my duties poorly, that I'm going to disappoint you and myself.

A close runner up to those dreams is a recurring dream about snakes. You ever dream about snakes? I guess this goes back to the old serpent in Genesis 3, but I have this dream about snakes living under my house, under the couch, under my bed—snakes everywhere! Like that pit in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

So I decided to Google dreams about snakes. You know, you can learn anything from Google. It said that if you have dreams about snakes there may be things in your waking life that are threatening, things that you are afraid of facing. Of course, that would be true for most of us most of the time, right? We probably ought to be dreaming about snakes every night!

What's really frightening is that story from Numbers 21. Talk about the ultimate nightmare! Except it is not presented as a dream. The people of Israel had left slavery in Egypt and were making their way

through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The people became impatient and complained about Moses, their leader, which they had done before. But this time they complained “against God” as well.

“Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” they whined.

Somewhat like children, they complained that there was no food and no water. Now, I interpret *no* food and *no* water to mean that there is none. Zilch. Nada. Nothing. Right? Here’s their full complaint, “For there is no food and no water, and we detest this *miserable food*.” So they had food! They just didn’t like the food they had.

The text says that God responded to their juvenile complaining with a harsh and unusual judgment. God sent poisonous snakes among the people, that ultimate nightmare. The text calls them fiery serpents because, when the snakes bit, the poison burned. The people were dying. All around people were being bitten by the snakes and dying. So Moses prayed on behalf of the people. God told Moses to fashion a snake out of bronze and lift it up on a pole. Then anyone who was bitten could look up at the bronze snake and be healed. Interesting. Notice that God did not take away the snakes. Instead, God used a snake as a means of healing.

Serpents figure prominently in the ancient world. Since snakes can shed their skin and be “reborn,” some thought snakes lived forever. Have you ever seen a snake die of old age? They became objects of worship. Some believed they had healing powers. In fact, the most common symbol of the medical profession today is a staff with two serpents wrapped around it. When King Josiah reformed Jewish worship in the book of 2 Kings, he tore down this bronze serpent because the people had begun to worship it instead of God.

Jesus knew this story about Moses and the bronze serpent. He told it to the man named Nicodemus in John 3. John describes Nicodemus as a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. He says that Nicodemus “came to Jesus by night.” That was John’s way of saying that it may have been nighttime, and that Nicodemus was in darkness, spiritual darkness, regardless of his credentials. Jesus told Nicodemus

that he must be “born from above.” The learned Pharisee and leader of the Jews was confused. “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” he asked Jesus. “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

In his attempt to explain, Jesus reached back to the book of Numbers and pulled out the story about Moses and the bronze serpent. “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,” Jesus told Nicodemus, “so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

That’s John 3:15, which means John 3:16, perhaps the most beloved passage in the Bible, follows. In my translation, verses sixteen through twenty-one are in red lettering, meaning that the translators believe these are the words of Jesus. Scholars are divided here. The Greek language had no quotation marks, so there’s no way of knowing for sure whether these are Jesus’ words or John’s commentary. Whether Jesus’ words or John’s, they are still some of the most beloved in the Bible.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.*

Let me give you the David Freeman translation of John 3:16.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has been bitten by that old serpent may gaze upon the one lifted up and be healed.*

That included Nicodemus, who, remember, was in darkness. We see Nicodemus two more times in the Gospel of John. In chapter seven, the chief priest and Pharisees sent the temple police to arrested Jesus. There was a lot of uncertainty about Jesus. Some people really believed he was the Messiah. The temple police didn’t know what to do, so they came back without Jesus. The Pharisees were upset and criticized the police, accusing them of being deceived by Jesus. Guess who spoke up to defend Jesus? Nicodemus. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, was the one who spoke up and reminded the chief priest and other

Pharisees that their law did not arrest people without giving them a fair hearing.

Is that belief? Not exactly. But it's not complete darkness either. Nicodemus was moving in the right direction.

The last time we see Nicodemus is at the end of the gospel, chapter 19. Jesus had been rushed through a sham of a trial. He was found guilty and sentenced to death. John says that Jesus carried his own cross to The Place of the Skull, Golgotha. I've seen it. It may be the most moving site I've ever seen. There they crucified him, John says, with a criminal on either side. After Jesus died, a man named Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple, asked for the body of Jesus. Listen to what John says,

*Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bring a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.*

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took the body of Jesus and gave it a proper Jewish burial. Nicodemus was there. When it counted. Nicodemus went from the darkness of John 3 to the light of John 19. It took the entire Gospel of John, but Nicodemus entered the light.

What happened? We don't know for sure, but here's my speculation. He was at Golgotha. Nicodemus gazed up at the one on the cross. And he was healed. Interesting. God used a man to heal men and women. I think that is what happened to the centurion too. He was there to keep order. But when he gazed up at the one on the cross, he was healed. "Truly this man was God's son!" he declared. And one of the criminals being crucified beside Jesus. He too gazed at the one on the cross beside him, and he was healed. "Today you will be with me in Paradise," Jesus told him. And the crowds. They ran away from Golgotha beating their breasts, suddenly aware of the one who had been lifted upon that pole. They entered the light.

The Lenten season is an invitation to look up. Look up at the man upon the cross, the man who came to heal men and women. Gaze upon him and be healed. Deep within. From all the poison of life. It is an invitation to leave the darkness and enter the light. It begins with the prayer he prayed, "Thy will be done."

### Closing Prayer

With poison coursing through our veins, we look to you, Lord. Heal us deep within. Amen.