

Sermon March 10, 2024

So Loved

What does it look like to be loved by God? What does it feel like?

For Noah it was the promise of a rainbow after the rain; for Sarah it was a glimpse of a bright star twinkling in the sky. For you, it might be a butterfly fluttering by or the touch of a hand by a beloved friend.

We just heard John's promises of how much God loves the world and this is one of the most loved verses in the Bible. Martin Luther once called them the heart and soul of our faith.

But this beloved verse about God's love does not stand alone. A Pharisee named Nicodemus has crept out in the dark of night, seeking answers from Jesus. As he looks up at the covenantal stars above, he struggles to understand what Jesus tells him about New Life.

Finally Jesus points to an ancient story... a wilderness story... another time when people struggled to understand.

Because the ancient Israelites had felt God's love surround them as the waters of the Red Sea parted. Not that long before today's story, the Israelites had been singing and dancing as they crossed over dry land, walls of water protecting them on each side. And the singing and dancing just got louder as they turned around and saw the water crashing down, sweeping their captors away forever.

But the time for joy doesn't last. In the days and nights that follow, the singing and dancing come to an end. The Promised Land seems like a distant dream... The people are hungry... the people are thirsty... those years of slavery don't seem so bad anymore because at least they had food and water... even if they didn't have freedom. No matter how cruel the Egyptian captors were, the wilderness seemed so much worse.

The first George Bush once said that hindsight is 90/90 vision. I've always liked that quote, because when we look back at where we have been, it tends to be distorted. We focus on what we want to remember and the rest gets hazy or just disappears. The Israelites are experiencing 90/90 vision and when they turn their eyes on the present, they don't like what they see.

And with their 90/90 vision, they blame Moses... and God.

"Look at this mess!" they cry out. "Why did you drag us out of Egypt to die in this godforsaken country? No decent food; no water—this is ridiculous. And it's all your fault!!"

God has done so much for them and has promised so much more, and all they can do is complain. But, if we are honest with ourselves, we might whine too if we were stuck in the wilderness, hungry, thirsty and cold. Sometimes the curve balls life throws at us make us just want to complain: We complain about our family, we complain about school, we complain about our job we complain about the state of the world, maybe we even complain about our church... but really what does that get us? Complaining doesn't change anything.

Or does it? Because if you look to the example of the Israelites, their situation did change:

It got worse!

The more they complained and whined, the deeper into the wilderness they went until finally they found themselves in a horrible place, surrounded by poisonous snakes, and no escape route. Their complaints stopped because they didn't have time to complain! Now they were literally struggling to survive. Some of them were bitten by the snakes... and they died painful and horrible deaths. They could have kept complaining about the injustice of being led out of Egypt only to die by poisonous bites, but they tried something new. The people came to Moses and fell down on their knees: "We sinned when we spoke out against God and you. Please pray to God; ask him to take these snakes from us."

The Israelites learned an important lesson: Complaining keeps us farther from God... The people forget to trust the one who had already saved them.

The people must look away from themselves and look to the consequences of their rejection of God's promises. The consequence is fiery serpents in their midst.

Look at your own lives and maybe you can see what fiery serpents are set loose in our own lives when we try to do things our own way instead of God's way.

God responded to their pleas: When the people were bitten by a serpent, they looked to the bronze serpent and saw the deadly results of their sin. No more 90/90 vision. Their eyes were cleared to see God's promises. It wasn't the bronze serpent or even Moses who did that healing... **it was God.**

That's what God taught the ancient Israelites... that's what Jesus taught Nicodemus... that's what we learn today.

God's healing promises continue today, sweeping away the serpents in our lives. *"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."* Just as Moses held the bronze serpent high to remind us of God's promises, so do we turn to the one who was lifted high upon a cross. Words that have guided and sustained people through hard times as well as during blessings. The heart and soul of our faith.

Look at what it says: Jesus is crucified because of the sins of others... Because of the selfish or self-centered needs of those around him, needs that pull them away from God. Look at the events that led to Jesus' arrest and death. Political and religious leaders struggle to gain power and control, at the expense of one itinerant preacher's life. The crowds and Peter deny him, even after they had seen his healing power. They turned away to protect their own lives.

And the betrayal, given through a kiss...

But God reminds us to look up and see God's own son *"lifted up"*-- crucified. When we do, we see the deadly consequences of being separated from God. Turn away from our own needs and desires and look towards the promises of God: To *believe* in him is to live. Somehow, despite our own struggles, in Christ we see our hope.

Nowhere in all of this does God promise to take away the things that harm us. The fiery serpents still slither throughout lives, threatening to harm us. But, God gives us what we need to heal our wounds and move on. All we have to look up, trust and believe.

And why? Because God loves us. God loves us so much. God loves us enough to forgive us when we do stupid things that keep us separated from God. God loves us so much as to offer us new and powerful ways to return back into God's loving arms. God loves us so much that God sent us Jesus to lead us to a better way. It's all in that one verse:

"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."

In faith, God gives us new vision... the ability to God's reign with clear eyes

We are on a life-long journey, and God's love is available to sustain us through it all. Sometimes we are in the dark wilderness, surrounded by fiery serpents; sometimes we triumphantly dance through the parted seas. But no matter where we are on life's journey, it's too easy to get side tracked and lose our way. But when we stumble, God promises to seek us out and has given us a beacon to guide us.

As you travel, remember to look up towards the cross. Look directly to the promises of God. When we look up to the goodness and graciousness of God, we walk more closely with Christ. And with Jesus at our side, we are less vulnerable to getting lost.

With Jesus at our side, we can hold on to the loving promises given to us and hope. Because "...whoever believes ... may have eternal life."

So look up and look beyond your own lives. Look up and believe. Look up and feel the love. Amen