

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Looking in the Right Direction

Numbers 21:4-9

Congregational worship requires a lot of lifting. I don't mean carrying those heavy offering boxes that we position at the church entrance each Sunday, or getting the speaker back and forth through the window to the fellowship hall. I'm talking about the kind of lifting that directs our attention to the Lord. Today's call to worship spoke of gates or doors being lifted up so that God may enter the city and sanctuary. In our Scripture reading from John, Jesus speaks of being "lifted up from the earth" (12:32) as a way of referring to his crucifixion and to his resurrection and ascension. These texts, and all the other parts of our worship service, enable us to lift our hearts to the living God.

Folks will often speak of worship as an uplifting experience. You may have arrived feeling low, but by the time the benediction is spoken and the sanctuary doors are opened for your exit into the world, you've been elevated, lifted up. You're ready for the next leg in your ongoing journey of faith.

In today's text from Numbers, the roundabout journey of God's people takes them through what seems like a never-ending wilderness, where they begin to lift up their voices, not in praise but in complaint. They're getting impatient with God and with their leaders, especially Moses. Why is this journey taking so long? Does God really know what he's doing? Can he be trusted? Is there really such a land as the one God has promised? Maybe the land where we used to be wasn't so bad after all. At least when we were in Egypt, we had a better choice of foods. This strange diet of manna and quail is getting old. And now we're here in the middle of nowhere, with no bread and no water. This is no pilgrimage that leads to life. It's just a procession to our own death.

From there, things just get worse. The people experience a plague of poisonous snakes, sent by God. Many of the Israelites end up dead. Clearly, this God who has rescued them from slavery and brought them into covenant with himself takes faithfulness seriously, both his faithfulness and theirs. Being redeemed by this God doesn't mean being free from the expectation to keep on trusting in his promises, and to be thankful for his provision. There in the wilderness, when the destination seems to recede farther and farther into the distance, God's people have to constantly choose between persevering gratitude or persistent grumbling. The first one keeps them connected to their Savior's life-giving power. The second one severs them from the source of their existence and their future.

Thankfully, God's will for his people is still life. Out of the unfaithfulness, and the sickness it brings, God still brings healing. In our text, God's solution isn't to remove the snakes but to provide a means for healing in the midst of the danger. The restoration begins as the people name their sin and ask Moses to pray for them. Moses, as is often the case, takes up his role as mediator, facilitating communication between God and God's people. They want Moses to get God to "take the snakes away from us" (v. 7). But the snakes don't just vanish. The Israelites still get bitten. But God makes a way for them to be delivered. The Lord tells Moses to fashion a snake out of bronze and put it on a pole. When any of the

people are bitten, they're to gaze at this bronze snake and be healed. They'll live. And it works.

Strange thing, isn't it? Using a snake image to heal someone from a snakebite. It sounds less like a vaccine and more like a therapeutic or an antiviral. This snake-on-a-pole doesn't keep you from getting bitten, but it does work as an antivenom. Whatever the specifics, I can imagine there were many Israelites rushing to thank Doctor Moses. But Moses was quick to divert the praise to the Lord, whose mercy made it all possible. Remember that this story, like so many other scenes from Israel's journey through the wilderness, is a story of God's provision.

In a meditation on today's text, Timothy Dalrymple reflects on one of the possible messages God was sending his people. He writes:

Consider for a moment something simpler: the physical posture this required of the sufferer. Imagine a young woman dragging her weary body across the sun-scorched earth of Edom. The snake bites. Where does the young woman look? What would be, in that moment, the most natural thing she could possibly do? The answer, of course, is to look *down*. To fix her eye on the snake, or on the wound, or to look for more snakes concealed among the rocks.

In order to receive healing, the sufferer has to *turn away from* the object of her affliction and *turn to* the object of God's provision.¹

In other words, our healing and hope reside with the Lord. He's the one to whom we lift our eyes. That, as I indicated earlier, is essential to what we do as God's gathered people, especially on Sunday morning. We do a lot of lifting. We lift our lives to the Lord. We lift our gifts to the Lord. We lift others up to the Lord. We lift our hearts to the Lord. We lift ourselves to the one who has lifted us up from the dead through Jesus Christ.

To lift our eyes to the Lord means we direct our attention to him. Having our attentiveness shaped toward Jesus is critical, especially in a day and time when so many things work to divide our attention and fragment our focus. The sheer quantity of appeals, requests, inquiries, and advertisements coming at us each day, each demanding a piece of our time and attention, leaves us feeling like we can't really settle in and be present to the things that often matter most. Add to this the impact of technology, particularly the speed at which information flows and the way we engage with the internet, and it's no wonder that we feel like we're just scrolling our way through life, pausing just long enough to pick up a bit of this or to link to that. Our hearts and minds become unaccustomed to parking themselves in one spot and staying there long enough to take in what's being shown to us.

Pastor and author Eugene Peterson has written:

Two commands direct us from the small-minded world of self-help to the large world of God's help. First, "Come, behold the works of the Lord." Take a long, scrutinizing look at what God is doing. This requires patient attentiveness and energetic concentration. Everybody else is noisier than God. The headlines and neon lights and amplifying systems of the world announce human works. But what of God's works? They are unadvertised but also inescapable, if we simply look. They are everywhere. They are marvelous. But God has no public relations agency. He mounts no publicity campaign to get our attention. He simply invites us to look....²

"Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived." I'm thinking this look at the bronze snake wasn't just a quick glance, equivalent to the time it takes to check your phone screen for the latest notification. No, this was a deeper, longer,

more concentrated gaze at the symbol of healing, the sign of rescue from death and destruction. After all, that's where our deliverance and restoration come from. They don't come from within us but from beyond us. They come from outside of us. That's why the basic posture of the Christian life, including worship, is looking up.

In today's Scripture from John, Jesus says to the crowd, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (12:32). Earlier in John, in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus says, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (3:14). The power of God for salvation, the power of life, is in Jesus, most of all in his death and resurrection. Jesus is the antidote to our sin sickness. He's the way out of death and back into life. He's the source of our healing and the reason for our hope.

That's why we have to constantly direct our attention toward Jesus. Otherwise, we fix our gaze on and devote our attention to things that can't truly make us alive. Even the bronze snake in today's story was eventually discarded from God's ongoing purposes. After its initial use and purpose, the Israelites kept the bronze snake and lugged it around with them during their remaining years in the wilderness. As that generation began to die off, they passed the bronze snake on to their children, who kept it as part of their life in the Promised Land. Centuries later, the bronze snake was placed in the newly constructed Temple. Though its purpose was to be a reminder of how God had been with his people and what he had done for them, with time the bronze snake became an object of worship. In 2 Kings 18:4, we're told that King Hezekiah had it destroyed, cut into pieces. God's people had forgotten the living and redeeming God who sent them healing, and had fixed their attention on an object fashioned by human hands. They had been lifting their hearts, but not to the Lord.

Timothy Dalrymple writes:

We become what we attend to. The more we devote our attention to worldly diversions, the more worldly and divided we become. The more we harness all of our attention into attentiveness to Jesus Christ, the more we are united with Christ and conformed to his image.

In this season, countless anxieties and agitations clamor for our attention. Help us, O Lord, to discipline our powers of attention. Help us to lift our eyes away from our passing troubles and to fix our eyes on the one who was lifted up for us.³

The direction of our lives is shaped by the direction in which we're looking. Sundays are for looking up. This is the day when we do a lot of our lifting. Lifting our hearts, minds, lives, and others up to the Lord. Not that we shouldn't be looking up and lifting up the rest of the week. We need to constantly be directing our attention to Jesus through Scripture, prayer, service, and song. As we sing: "O soul, are you weary and troubled? / No light in the darkness you see? / There's light for a look at the Savior, / And life more abundant and free! / Turn your eyes upon Jesus / Look full in his wonderful face, / And the things of earth will grow strangely dim / in the light of his glory and grace." Look to Jesus, and live.

¹ Timothy Dalrymple, "Lift Your Eyes Up." Christianity Today website. April 15, 2020. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/april-web-only/meditation-coronavirus-pandemic-lift-your-eyes-up.html> (Accessed March 10, 2020).

² Eugene Peterson, *Earth and Altar* (Downers Grove:IVP, 1085) 77-79).

³ Dalrymple, "Lift Your Eyes Up."