

Look Up And Live!

It's important to be careful with Biblical citations.

When you cite chapter and verse of a certain Biblical passage, chances are most people are not going to know what it says.

Maybe you've heard the story of the mother of the bride who thought she'd add a suitable Christian tone to the wedding reception of her jittery daughter. She asked the baker to write out the text of the first part of 1 John 4:18 on the wedding cake.

And it's a great verse for someone who is nervous about getting married, or so she thought. It would read the following:

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear...”

A great way to calm her daughter down; sensitive, caring motherly thing to do...

However the baker made a mistake and used John 4:18 – not 1 John 4:18.

When the cake came back it read,

“For you have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband...”

So...

If I were to ask you what the best known citation from scripture is...the most famous chapter and verse...what would you say?

That's right! **John 3:16**

You see it at athletic games on posters...people hold it up

You see it on T-shirts

You see it on Tim Tebow's eyeblick

It's on the bottom of cups at “In And Out Burger”

This scripture reference is also discretely printed on the bottom of the

Forever 21 Bags – Maybe you didn't know that...

Many people call it “the gospel in a nutshell”

It is probably the most famous verse in the Bible...

In a nighttime meeting with a Pharisee named Nicodemus, Jesus says these words...John 3:16...Let's read them together...

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

Now we are in a series on Forgotten Stories of the Bible

Why would I use the most famous verse of scripture for the talk this AM?

The one that many, many people are familiar with...

Well, just before John 3:16 Jesus makes reference to a story in the Old Testament that is not so familiar that sets the stage for John 3:16...

Right before...the John 3:16 passage..., Jesus refers to an Old Testament Story...and he says... **“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man (Jesus himself) must be lifted up.”**

When Jesus says lifted up, he is referring to his own death on the cross.

But what is the story of the serpent all about – and why does Jesus use this story to describe his death?

The story of the serpent on the pole, that we read this morning comes from the book of Numbers. Gina did a great job reading it. The people have been in the wilderness, and they are murmuring OR complaining...yet again.

There are a number of stories about the Hebrew people in the wilderness complaining and complaining and complaining in the OT...but this one is the last story of complaint in the book of Numbers...and it is the most significant

The people speak again, for the umpteenth time, against God and against Moses (after God has led them through the Red Sea, provided them with food and water, given them a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day to guide them). God has reminded them again and again that he is a part of their journey. He is with them in the wilderness...

But, they are still not happy... They say to God and to 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.”

You notice the contradiction in the complaint?

First they say there is no food...then we learn there actually is food – manna that God has provided...but they don't like it anymore. They are bored of it. They want steak, or lasagna, or chicken parmigiana.

Then they say, **“It would have been better for us to die in Egypt than here in this desert without food and water.”**

God is leading them to freedom! To the promised land...he's given them food from the heavens – the manna; and he has given them water gushing from a rock. All that they need! But they are telling God that they would rather die as slaves.

As they are complaining, it is interesting to note that the people use the generic Hebrew term **Elohim for God...not the personal word; the name**

Yahweh was the Jewish sacred way that the Jews alone referred to God... In other words the people are distancing themselves from God with their complaining, murmuring, dissatisfaction with the way things are... and have forgotten the personal nature of God's leading... step by step... all along the way..

And you know... often in our own wildernesses we will do this.

When we go through a hard time, a wilderness period we can begin to think God isn't around and we begin to doubt his intimate, personal care and concern.

We begin to think that God is "out to get us".

We want a different journey, a different story to our lives, "Gosh... we may think... if only it had happened differently in my life. If only I had a different circumstance here or there... I'm just not satisfied... if only I'd had a different financial situation, a different body, a different spouse, a different child, a different job, a different set of relationships ... on and on

That's why marketing in America works so well... it tells us... just get this next thing... and then you'll be satisfied... right?

Well, scripture tells us God is weary of their complaining. In fact he gets kind of ticked.

Scripture tells us that God sends fiery serpents, who bite the people and they begin to die.

It is definitely a punitive act on the part of God. A wake up call.

When the serpents come and people begin to die in the wilderness the people realize that they have been wrong.

They wake up to their sin!

They run to Moses, who is their intermediary and ask him to pray for them.

They say, "**We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us!**" (v.7)

So Moses prays.

God's solution?

Interestingly he didn't take the serpents away.

Instead he tells Moses, "Make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at the bronze serpent and live."

So Moses crafts a serpent of bronze, puts it on a pole, and it works perfectly

– whenever a serpent bites someone the person looks up at the serpent of bronze and is healed.

There's a paradox here, isn't there?

God didn't have Moses stick a smiley face on a pole, a beautiful flower, a lovely piece of art ...he doesn't put a rainbow in the sky for the people to look at and heal them that way.

That's what I would have done.

Beauty, transcendence, etc. something positive and joyful brings healing, right?

No! God has Moses put on that pole the very thing the people feared the most! That venomous serpent that was destroying their friends and family. The very snake that was biting and killing their people...they had to look at it...recognize it for what it was

And when they looked at it...the thing they feared...the thing that could destroy them....they lived!

What's that all about?

Let me ask you this...

Have you ever been afraid to look at something?

If I know I've eaten a lot lately I am afraid to look at the scale.

If I've been spending too much, I am afraid to look at my bank account.

I had a teacher in school who always handed our tests back face down – It was a really hard class and most of the time I was afraid to look at the grade, fearing that I had failed. I'd very slowly lift up the corner of the paper, and then put it down again. I didn't want to know the truth. It was too scary. Too difficult to handle.

There is a certain closet in my house. I don't want to look in there. It is too cluttered and full of junk. I avoid it, and I close the door. Too disturbing.

But I need to look in the closet so I clean it out right?

I need to look at the test score, so I can learn the right answers to the ones I got wrong. Not looking doesn't solve anything. It just makes it worse.

In a more serious vein, a lot of people walk around with secrets ; often they hold onto behaviors or addictions that are destructive, or things in their past that they will not look at. It is too scary to come clean. Too difficult to see...to look at..to deal with.

And yet after years of working with people on the caring end of ministry, I've got to tell you that often the first step toward healing, just on a

psychological level alone, is being able to look at the thing, or person, or circumstance that you fear the most...once you are not afraid to confront it, then you can work it through, and healing can come.

On a spiritual level when you have the courage to look at the truth of your own brokenness, sin, hurt or pain...you will eventually find Jesus there... holding you, forgiving you, setting you free.

Honesty ushers in God's presence. Living a lie pushes God out.

When you look at what you fear the most you will eventually see that no matter what you have been through God's love and presence can handle it. God's love will bring you through.

I worked with a woman whom I will call Deb, who lived with guilt about a secret sin in her life. She knew intellectually that God forgave her, but she just couldn't forgive herself.

She distracted herself from her guilt in a myriad of destructive ways and for the longest time would not look or deal with the problem. Deep down, she truly believed that if anyone really knew her and knew what she had done they would reject her.

Finally, after years of not looking at what terrified her the most about her past, she decided to drum up some courage. She went to a trusted friend and haltingly, tearfully, scared out of her wits told her friend everything she had done and how sorry she was and about the guilt she had borne all these years. Thank goodness the woman she went to was full of grace. Her response? At the end of Deb's story, which she admitted to me was horrific, she looked Deb in the eye and said, "Deb, I loved you before. But I love you even more now."

That response changed Deb's life.

"I never thought it was possible," she told me, "that anyone would love me after what I had done. I feel like I have been healed on the inside."

So Moses puts that venomous serpent on a pole. **Look at it!** He probably cried. **Look at what you fear the most! Look up and live!!**

Those who looked, and were not afraid to look at what they feared the most, were healed.

I am sure many of you know the symbol for the American Medical Association.

It is called the rod Asclepius. (IMAGE)

This portrays a snake entwined around an upright pole.
Some believe that this story of Moses, lifting up the serpent on a pole for healing, is where this symbol originated from.
Also, snake venom was known in ancient times as a substance that when injected into the bloodstream in sufficient quantities, could kill, but when given in smaller doses could have a therapeutic effect.
To this day, actually, anti-venom used to combat snakebites is prepared from the actual venom of snakes.

The very thing that could kill me, produces healing
The very thing I fear the most, when I look up at it, I live! I am healed!!
God is bigger, and can handle the worst of my sin, and depth of my pain.
I've got to trust that. And when I trust that truth, I can look at what I fear the most.

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up....For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.”

Jesus is our bronze serpent. The one who brings healing in the midst of an evil, fallen, broken world.
The one forgives our sins, and sets us free, and brings us salvation.

You may have heard that before...but
Let me just remind you of something you may have forgotten...that having a cross hanging in the front of a place of worship in Jesus' day, would be like putting an electric chair up here.
In addition, the cross was not just a means of death, but also a means of torture...
It would horrify you in that ancient culture to walk into a synagogue or place of worship and see a Roman Cross – something used by a pagan culture to keep your people in submission to an oppressive regime
It wasn't only the physical pain of the cross that was revolting – it was also the political implications...force, power, control, paganism
No devout Jew wanted to look at the cross.

When Jesus' disciples looked at the cross what did they see?
At first they saw terrible things...

Death. Torture, Agony, Despair, Rejection, Humiliation

But as they looked longer, and saw God's plan unfold
Beyond the horror of the cross, an even greater truth emerged
The truth was resurrection – victory over death – and the strong eternal love
of Jesus
That's why the Protestant cross is empty.
It depicts resurrection...hope, salvation;
Beyond what you fear the most there is grace upon grace...forgiveness, and
mercy,
And God says to you and to me today
No matter where you've been, or what you've been through
Come to the cross. There is forgiveness here. There is rest for the weary.
There is healing.
Look up and live!

Mabel was a woman who had lived in a state convalescent hospital for 29
years. Mabel was blind and almost deaf, and had a big hearing aid in one
ear. Tom Schmidt was the chaplain in this state hospital, and he describes
the place this way, *“A state run convalescent hospital is not a pleasant
place. It is large, understaffed and filled with
senile, helpless and lonely people who are waiting to die.
On the brightest of days, it seems dark
inside, and it smells of sickness.
“I went there once or twice a week for four years,
but I never wanted to go there, and I always left with a sense of relief. It's
not the kind of place
one gets used to.”*

It's there that Tom met Mabel. He was walking the hall of a new ward that
day, looking for people he could give a flower to, and a word of cheer.
He was burnt out and tired in his ministry. This wasn't exactly the most
rewarding of jobs.

When he saw Mabel, sitting strapped in her wheel chair, he walked right by
as quickly as he could. That's because Mabel's face was terribly deformed
because of illness...

Ontop of that her eyes were white due to her blindness, and he doubted she
was even lucid.

He learned later that Mabel was such an appalling sight that new nurses were
sent to her. The staff believed if the new nurses could handle Mabel's
appearance, they would be able to handle anyone. Tom walked right by

Mabel that day...as quickly as he could. But he didn't get very far. The Holy Spirit nudged him. That still small voice spoke to him...*Stop....Go back...look at that woman you don't want to look at. Give her one of the flowers in your hand.*

Reluctantly Tom turned around. He gazed at Mabel for a minute and pushed down his feelings of disgust at the deformity in her face.

Then he handed her a flower. "Here's a flower for you". He said Mabel held the flower up to her face and tried to smell it, and then she spoke "To my

Surprise", writes Tom, "*her words though somewhat garbled because of her deformity, were obviously produced by a clear mind. She said:*

Thank you. It's lovely, but can I give it to someone else. I can't see it. I'm blind, you know.

I said, "Of course," and I pushed her in her chair back down the hallway to a place I thought I

could find some alert patients. I found one and stopped the chair. Mabel held out the flower and said:

Here. This is from Jesus.

Mabel and I became friends over the next few weeks, and I went to see her once or twice a week

for the next three years. Her first words to me were usually an offer of hard candy from a tissue

box near her bed. Some days I would read to her from the Bible and often I would pause, and she

would continue reciting the passage from memory word for word.

Other days, I would take a book of hymns and sing with her, and she would know all the words to the old songs.

One day I went to her and asked:

Mabel. What do you think about when you lie here all day?

And she said:

I think about my Jesus.

I sat there and thought for a moment about the difficulty for me of thinking about Jesus for even

five minutes, and I asked:

What do you think, when you think about Jesus?

She replied slowly and deliberately as I wrote it all down. It was life giving for Tom to hear her talk about Jesus. ...and he wanted to capture every word. Well, she said, I think about how good he's been to me. He's been awfully good to me you know. We are friends...real close. Like the old hymn says, "When I am sad, he makes me glad."

(Now you have to decide if this is someone in denial, or if this is someone who is in touch with the kind of life that is pretty much a mystery to most folks in our world.)

He's been awfully good to me in my life, you know. She said again..I'm one of those kind who is mostly satisfied. Lots of folks wouldn't care much for what I think. Lots of folks would think I'm kind of old-fashioned, but I don't care. I'd rather have Jesus than anything. He's all the world to me.

Through Mabel, Tom was rejuvenated. She was an inspiration to him. I use this story because it is a living example – almost a parable - of looking at what we don't want to look at, which may at first be horrific and terrifying...and then, to our surprise finding Jesus there, and finding healing. That's the power of the bronze serpent, that's the power of the cross... That's the paradox and power of the gospel
Beyond what you fear the most, there is grace upon grace...

May we all have the courage and strength to look up...and live! Amen