Gaines Congregational United Church of Christ

March 11, 2018 4th Sunday in Lent

Old Testament Reading; Numbers 21: 4-9

Responsive Reading; Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22

Epistle Reading; Ephesians 2: 1-10

Gospel Reading; John 3: 14-21

Sermon Title: LOOK UP AND LIVE

By Rev. Jim Gardner

Summary: You can look up and live forever, or you can look down at the snakes and die again and again. Your choice.

Just before the start of our Old Testament reading the Israelites made a request to God and he came through for them. It seems some Canaanites attacked them and took some Israelite prisoners. They asked God to help them defeat this enemy and he did and they totally destroyed the cities of the offenders.

Sounds like a time to remain faithful and respectful towards God, right? Well not right if you are spoiled crybabies.

They continued on their way “and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. And 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 our soul loathes this worthless bread.” “Our soul loathes this worthless bread.”

Hello! This worthless bread? This is the Manna from heaven that God sent to his people every morning so they would be nourished every day and able to continue their trek in the wilderness and now they are calling it worthless bread.

OK! Enough is enough.

God sent “fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.”

Wake up call! Just like clockwork the Israelites responded by admitting their stupidity and asked Moses to pray to God to remove the snakes.

As usual God came through but he did not let them off scot free this time. God told Moses to make the image of a “fiery serpent” and mount it on a tall pole that would be lifted in the air for everyone to see.

Notice God did not remove the snakes, and God did not stop the snakes from biting. What God did is that He provided a way for his ungrateful followers from dying from the bites.

God will come through for us even if we do not deserve it.

I would like you to notice how the snakes are described. Fiery serpents, indicates a very painful experience.

This is not like, “I went to pick a rose and a thorn poked me, or Ouch, I just stepped on a tack, or even I went to mow the lawn by a Locust tree and a two inch thorn sliced my forehead.”

No. Not that minor. These were “fiery serpents”.

Now I have never had the pleasure [tongue in cheek] of having been bitten by a venomous snake but TV documentaries describe it as extremely painful.

Now fiery serpents are very real and they bite us all the time. Some fiery serpents are living, breathing reptiles and some are invisible and bite us right on the heart.

Moses told his people that when they were bitten they should look up and they would live. Hence my title, LOOK UP AND LIVE.

The symbolism of this is tremendous.

When we are bitten by the snakes of life and we lose a lifelong partner or are diagnosed with cancer or lose our job and the means to take care of our loved ones it hurts so bad it will bring us right down to our knees. The snakes are real and the pain is more than real.

If in these times we choose to look down at the snakes and the dirt they crawl around in we will die. We will die and we will die a death worse than physical death. We will have nothing to live for but the pain will not go away in that eternal sleep. I’m not even talking about heaven here I am saying that even nothingness would be better than the continuous pain.

At this time I must sidetrack for a moment to rave about this book we call the Holy Bible. The connection between the Old Testament and the New is so awesome. Was the Old Testament predicting the life and actions of Jesus or was Jesus using divine direction to show how his life and actions were in keeping with the ongoing plan of God, or both?

Moses made a bronze model of a snake on top of a tall pole to be looked at when someone was bitten by a “fiery serpent”. This gave the victim a positive image instead of an image of doom.

If when we are down we look up at the mountains, or a sunrise, or a sunset or stars or northern lights we will reap some benefits of our action. We will see God’s glory and that in and of itself will be therapeutic to some extent.

That is “to some extent” but to God “to some extent” is not good enough.

In our gospel lesson Jesus says, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

This is immediately followed by John 3: 16 which as you all know says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that who so ever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

God is not asking you to look up to a snake on a pole, that later had to be destroyed because people started to worship it, or at a sunset or stars or any other pretty thing He has placed in the heavens. God has asked you to look up to his Son who was given and died that you might be able to do as Moses proclaimed, “Look up and live.”

Jesus said, “I must be lifted up so that you too can look up and live, and by the way, you are welcome.”

So when those fiery serpents bite you, and they will, look up, look up to Jesus and he promises that you will live and live well in his outspread arms.

Hallelujah and Amen.