

“Looking Up”

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Complaints, complaints, complaints: that is all God heard day in and day out. You don't want to be God. It is kind of a pain. Can you imagine listening to every human being - knowing every human being and how many hairs they have on their head and every complaint they make every single day of the week? Who would want to be God?

Then here are the Israelites. I mean you can't blame God for getting upset once in a while, because here the Israelites are wandering through the wilderness. God has already given them this wonderful blessing of being taken out of Egypt. They are free - no longer held under bondage to slavery by the hand of Pharaoh.

Yet, day in and day out, [they] complain, complain, complain: The water is bitter, so the Lord teaches Moses how to sweeten it. Then they complain there is a lack of food. God says, “All you have to do is ask,” and manna comes down out of the skies.

“Well, I'm thirsty.”

“We just gave you enough” [is the response]. It is never good enough. So Moses goes out and God shows Moses where to whack the rock with the stick, and water flows freely - but that is not good enough.

“We are sick of manna. We want meat.” So God provides wind to go up and all the quail come flying in, and they have more than enough food to eat.

Sick, sick, sick. That is all these people are with their complaining.

Finally after 40 years of this complaining - they could have made it in a day and a half if they hadn't been complaining so much - they finally get to the Promised Land. God gets fed up when they start complaining about the fact that they are five feet from the Promised Land and they don't want to go in, because they are scared of the Canaanites. If God could bring this whole hoard through the wilderness - overcoming the Egyptians - and yet they still couldn't trust - no wonder God got a little angry.

So God does something that seems a little rude and inappropriate. He throws down this whole hoard of snakes. Well, that got their attention. It's horrible, those snakes. I wondered for a long time why God would do that, especially when it said some of them died. But remember, at the end of it, it said, everybody who looks up [will live]? Now, I wonder if even the eyes of the dead tilt their heads up, and they live?

Just like Jesus - who is able - when we look up to that cross, we live - not just now - but even in our death we find resurrection. I struggle with why God would use a symbol that Pharaoh had on the hat of his own head that had a serpent on it. Why God would use that same symbol in the wilderness, except that Pharaoh used that symbol and it didn't set anyone free. God uses it on a stick and everybody lives, is healed. God is more powerful than Pharaoh. New life is brought up.

Now I don't want to spend too much time on snakes, because frankly I will get in trouble with Jill. She is deathly afraid of snakes - that's why I played the snake sounds. I was looking at her when I read that, thinking, "I hope she gets the willies."

But in the Christian church it isn't a snake that goes up on the staff - it's a cross. And, on that cross we look up and we have life. Now, what Pam read so well from John 3:14 & 15 is truly remarkable. It blends together why the story is important for Christians.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness so, too, the son of humanity must be lifted up and, therefore, receive eternal life, and then we know the next one [verse]. But it all goes together: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever liveth and believe in him shall have not perish, but have life eternal.*

And verse 17. (We all know [verse] 16, because of the guy with the Afro, holding up the sign at the football game.) But verse 17 is most important: *For God came into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might have life through him.*

God didn't condemn. Even when God was so angry, he threw snakes in front of everybody. It was just to get our attention, when God had tried everything else. When we complain and carry on, sometimes bad things happen to us simply because God has to get our attention.

We are so busy complaining. We are looking everywhere else for things to complain about. I'm not going to tell you how I drive - I'm looking for a bumper to ride. I'm looking for somebody to holler at. (I'm confessing now.) I need to stop and look up - not so long that I hit the guy in front of me - but long enough to realize what is truly important; what is God calling us to do and who we need to fear.

Fear defines what controls us. I have a silly fear of needles and especially of my blood being drawn. I even talk about it and my skin gets clammy. I used to pass out, just from having my blood drawn. I go in to the doctor's office and they say, "Oh, Scott is here. We have pulled out the bed for you. You just lay down and we will do it that way for you. It's not as far to drop."

I think it was in 4th grade when I passed out for the first time. Ever since then it is just a reflex. I can't control it. Finally after years of having my blood drawn, a few different surgeries, and other things, I have gotten to the point where I won't pass out from that. But, I don't go to the blood bank because if I even see the blood going up [in those tubes] I get queasy.

This is a minister who goes to the hospitals every week, and I say, "Gee, I'm praying for you, I hope everything is OK." Scott [visiting] in an ICU is really an act of faith.

You know what I'm talking about, because just about everybody has their "thing" that is beyond their control. The minute you talk about it, it gets you all upset and your stomach queasy and you can't control it.

For Jill that is snakes. Snakes are evil critters. She is from Pennsylvania - the lower south part - and there are mountain snakes everywhere. You have copperheads. One day we were outside, and there was one going through the yard. The neighbor had gone out with a shovel. I was going the other way, but he was going right to the problem, and chops the head of the snake right off. That snake continued to curl up and strike without a head for another five

minutes, because that is what snakes do. They are evil, evil critters. There is a reason that God mentions them in the Bible.

Yet, as I go back and wonder why God told Moses to put that up there, [it] is because that is what people seem to fear most: 36 percent of American people are scared to death of snakes and call it their number one fear.

Now that is fine, but I kind of go, “I don’t know. If our number one instinct is survival, then I would think death would be our greatest fear.” I think that is what God understood. That is why I think the cross is so important. It symbolizes death.

I don’t know why we wear the cross around our necks, and it makes us feel all groovy and good to see the cross - because it’s a symbol of the most vile, violent death imaginable.

It was painful. It was evil. It was meant to be slow; to have somebody hang there for the longest period of time. You know we always guffaw when we hear about the soldier walking up and hitting Jesus knees and breaking his legs while he was hanging on the cross. He was being wonderful and caring, because it would allow Jesus to die faster.

The reason that the spear went through his side wasn’t to make the agony worse. It was to kill him faster. People could hang on that cross sometimes for 3, 4 and 5 days. It was a blessing they let Jesus die in a short amount of time.

So, we hang that around our necks sometimes. I think the reason it is acceptable and why I have had crosses that I wear, is to remind us that even the most frightening thing – death – is something that God can overcome. Nothing that I fear is beyond God’s control. No sin that I commit is greater or more powerful than God’s ability to forgive, and nothing that happens to me in this world can keep me from the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord - including death.

That symbol. That’s why Protestants do not have Jesus on that cross in a crucifix, because we believe – for us – Jesus is no longer on that cross. Jesus is bound in Heaven. Jesus is in our midst. Jesus is no longer suffering. That cross is empty, and that cross is empty to remind us that the crosses we bear we will not bear forever.

One day we will have the ability to be lifted from our cross for all eternity. That’s why – as sad as death might be – it is a moment to rejoice.

The worst, most painful funerals I’ve done are for children who never had the opportunity to have a life here on earth. But even that is a celebration, [because] they never had to go through the pain, they never had to go through the suffering, the injustice and the difficulties of this world. Even that we can celebrate, because they have walked into God’s Heavenly Kingdom without having to endure the punishment of this world.

God is blessed and has blessed each one of us.

Now Lucy was baptized today and she has been given a lot of blessings, because Chase and Erin are wonderful parents. Lucy is so blessed, because she is one of the very few who have the opportunity to have so many blessings in this world. She was born into a country that has freedom and opportunity, and parents who love her a lot. When you narrow down the percentages - that is a small percentage which come the responsibility of making something

of herself. But, most of all, she is blessed because she has a mother and father who are going to raise her in the faith, so that she knows who she is and whose she is.

She will know that, in her difficult moments of life, she can look up and see that cross. She knows that in the moments that are difficult – and I promise you she will have those moments because we all do – she can look up and see the promise of life eternal. There is no greater gift that we can give our children than to have that promise fulfilled. That is why we ask parents their questions. It isn't to just show off that they know the answer. It isn't so that we can laud them and show how faithful they are. It's to remind them of the responsibility they have to take this child and impart upon that child the most important thing in this world: her faith. How fortunate she is! She doesn't even know, at six weeks old, what Chase and Erin have given her: the foundation that comes with knowing God.

I have said this before and I will say it again, I have been with a lot of people when they have passed from this world. Over and over again, the people who fight the most are those who don't know where they are going and only know God as a stranger. But, over and over again, I see those people of faith who are able to let go and fall into the arms of the loving God, because they have known God all of their lives. It doesn't mean they don't doubt. It doesn't mean they don't struggle. But, at the end of the day, they have known God, known that empty cross, have looked up on so many occasions and have been freed from that bondage, by that deep and abiding faith.

It is our responsibility - whether we have children, or we adopt them as part of a church family - to make sure that every single one of them knows where to look in the difficult moments, and who to invite into the joyous ones.

We don't need to fear snakes or blood being drawn. We still may struggle with it, but ultimately it doesn't matter. It simply matters that God loves us, that God cares for us, that the distorted thinking is gone and the truth and the reality of God's presence is secure.

I ask each and every one of you, on this day, to renew your faith. Take some moment today and stop long enough to look up for just a moment and thank God that someone - maybe it was your mom, or your dad, or a friend, or another relative - introduced you to God's church. Think about who they were and the time they took and say a private, "thank you," to God - a prayer of thanksgiving - because they have given you the greatest gift of all: eternal life. The gift of having God in your midst through the good times and, even more importantly, in the difficult times. Then thank God for the people God placed in front of you along the way.

God promised in Baptism that God would care for you whether you are six weeks or 60 or 103. God has already laid a wonderful foundation for Lucy, with wonderful parents and family. God has laid out wonderful people in your life and will continue to do so. Just look up, stop the complaining, and rejoice.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen