**A Sermon for DaySpring**

By Eric Howell

*“Look Up! Look Up and Be Saved!”*

Numbers 21:4-9

March 11, 2018

The heart of Christianity is a paradox into which Lent takes us deeper. A vast unknowable God who defies comprehension, was at the same time a fragile human being, Jesus Christ who died on the cross. The depths of that paradox have no seeming limitation: eternity and flesh, power and submission, life and death.

The New Testament strains in every possible way to find images in history by which to help people enter this paradox and understand who Jesus is. No one single image will do. It takes many of them. Different images amplify different aspects of who he is.

So, in Romans, Jesus is the new Adam, the true firstborn of all creation. If all life originates in Adam, so new life originates in Christ. If sin comes into the world through Adam, salvation from sin comes through Christ. Christ is the new Adam, the true Son of God. In him is life eternal.

In Hebrews, Christ is a priest on the order of Melchizidek, an obscure figure in Genesis who just appears and to whom Abraham gives honor and homage. Like Melchizidek, Jesus’ birth story is mysterious and like Melchizidek, all of Abraham’s children may find their way to God through him. Christ is the new high priest.

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is a new Moses, ascending the mountain to bring the word of God to the people.

In Luke’s gospel, Jesus is like a new prophet Elijah, healing, performing miracles, crossing boundaries, showing grace to people who no one thought should have any grace.

In 1 Peter, Jesus is a new Noah, bringing humanity safely to salvation through the destruction that threatens their lives.

In John, Christ is the new David, the King of Israel, the new Messiah come to return Israel to glory. And he is the good shepherd tending to his sheep with compassion and courage.

Adam, Noah, the high priest, King David, Moses, Elijah, the good shepherd: these are the big time heroes of the old days, reconstituted in Christ, who gathers up the very best from all of these heroic faithful ones and embodies them. In them, Christ is the best of humanity, who meets and exceeds every model of faithfulness and goodness that came before.

And then there’s this other story, this other image from an obscure corner of the Old Testament. This one is not like the others, in just the way that the cross is not like anything else God’s faithful ones ever endured. But of all the images of Christ, this one may be the true path into the paradox at the heart of our faith. The incomprehensible, holy God became not just a fragile human, but also the very sign of the sin of all humans.

It’s Christ in the image of a serpent. A serpent, just like the serpent who tempted Eve, just like the image on Pharaoh’s crown, the serpent, the most biblically detested animal and symbol of temptation and sin becomes the image of Christ on the cross.

It’s a really confounding image to hold together: Christ and a serpent. We are much better at holding them apart; Christ as the one who defeats the serpentine evil. We are much better at thinking of the image of a lamb, even a lamb who is slain for Christ. Or of a lion, king of the jungle, Aslan, benevolent ruler of all. Jesus compares himself with a hen, a mother hen caring for her chicks, protecting them under her wings.

The strangest image of Christ would be a serpent, but there it is, this obscure image equally surprisingly nestled right snug up against the most well known verse in the New Testament, John 3:16. There is John 3:14, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

The story Jesus draws on as an image of his crucifixion is a mysterious story in itself. The Israelites are grumbling in the desert as they tend to do, but this time it’s even worse for them. After years of wandering, they’ve come close to the promised land and have just recorded their first success in battle against the Canaanites. It was their first time to win. But then, just right then, they are turned around and sent back the other direction, the wrong direction. One step forward, 40 years backward. There’s nothing more discouraging than getting a taste of relief only to have it taken away from you. They are mad. They are short-tempered, hungry, thirsty, impatient with Moses and frustrated with God. Their eyes are downcast, they are consumed with their complaints, frustrations, fears, hopelessness. In this season of life they aren’t looking for God anymore. This is important. Their eyes are on everything else but God and so their words are anything but prayers.

That’s when the snakes slither out. We talk about baptism as an outward sign of an inward reality. I think that’s what these snakes were too. They were an outward sign of danger, pain, and death, of the inward reality of their sin and lack of trust in God. They were snake bit, and they already were before the fangs came out. The outward sign revealed clearly the inward reality and they repented, begged Moses to ask God to take the snakes away. The Lord’s response was to tell Moses to make a fiery serpent, set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten “shall look at it and live.”

Moses took up a bit of bronze, someone’s kettle, and started hammering it into shape as fast as he could—people are dying-- shaping it into the form of a serpent. Desperation. How can this possibly work? You can’t see him doing this but you can hear the hammering all over the camp. Can you hear it, the hammer on the metal? Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. The hammer blows pounding on the metal. Like a hammer falling on a nail for a cross. Moses shapes a fiery serpent, and ties it to the top of a long pole.

Grace Imathiu, a wonderful preacher, imagines Moses running around the camp, like an ambulance, shouting: Look up! Look up and be saved! He’s saving every life he can, but he can’t force them to look up. They have to do it. Each person has to choose to take their eyes off themselves and their problems and pain and look up.

But that’s so hard. There are snakes, very real problems, dangers lurking all around. If you look away from them, take your eyes off the ground for a moment, you might get hurt. Then there are the hurts you already have: the wounds and the venom doing its work in you. It’s hard to lift your eyes away from your pain. Everything about their situation draws their attention inward, toward themselves, down toward the ground and their problems. And here’s the man of God shouting “look up” and be healed. And that’s hard.

And then there’s something else. If the snakes were outward manifestations of their sin, then looking up to the snake on the pole was like a public confession of sin. It was to confess, where everyone could see you, “I need help. I’m sick. I’m dying, and I need to be saved.” Each person has to overcome their own pride to recognize their need for salvation from death. With life and death hanging in the balance, the way to life demands more than some people can bear, yet it’s so simple. Look up and be saved.

I love stories of surprising grace. Charles Spurgeon was the greatest preacher of the 19th century and he preached a masterful sermon on this story, but even better is his own story that he tells in his autobiography (p. 112). It’s long, but it’s so good.

“I sometimes think I might have been in darkness and despair until now had it not been for the goodness of God in sending a snowstorm, one Sunday morning, while I was going to a certain place of worship. When I could go no further, I turned down a side street, and came to a little Primitive Methodist Chapel. In that chapel there may have been a dozen or fifteen people. I had heard of the Primitive Methodists, how they sang so loudly that they made people’s heads ache; but that did not matter to me. I wanted to know how I might be saved, and if they could tell me that, I did not care how much they made my head ache. The minister did not come that morning; he was snowed up, I suppose. At last, a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach. Now, it is well that preachers should be instructed; but this man was really stupid. He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had little else to say. The text was, — “LOOK UNTO ME, AND BE YE SAVED, ALL THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.” He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. There was, I thought, a glimpse of hope for me in that text. The preacher began thus: — “My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says, ‘Look.’ Now lookin’ don’t take a deal of pains. It ain’t liftin’ your foot or your finger; it is just, ‘Look.’ Well, a man needn’t go to College to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. A man needn’t be worth a thousand a year to be able to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look. But then the text says, ‘Look unto Me.’ Ay!” said he, in broad Essex, “many of ye are lookin’ to yourselves, but it’s no use lookin’ there. You’ll never find any comfort in yourselves. Some look to God the Father. No, look to Him by-and-by. Jesus Christ says, ‘Look unto Me.’ Some of ye say, ‘We must wait for the Spirit’s workin’.’ You have no business with that just now. Look to Christ. The text says, ‘Look unto Me.’ “ Then the good man followed up his text in this way: — “Look unto Me; I am sweatin’ great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hangin’ on the cross. Look unto Me; I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend to Heaven. Look unto Me; I am sittin’ at the Father’s right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! look unto Me!” When he had gone to about that length, and managed to spin out ten minutes or so, he was at the end of his tether. Then he looked at me under the gallery, and I daresay, with so few present, he knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart, he said, “Young man, you look very miserable.”

Well, I did; but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance before. However, it was a good blow, struck right home. He continued, “and you always will be miserable — miserable in life, and miserable in death, — if you don’t obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved.” Then, lifting up his hands, he shouted, as only a Primitive Methodist could do, “Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothin’ to do but to look and live.” I saw at once the way of salvation. I know not what else he said, — I did not take much notice of it, — I was so possessed with that one thought. Like as when the brazen serpent was lifted up, the people only looked and were healed, so it was with me.

I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard that word, “Look!” what a charming word it seemed to me! Oh! I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that instant, and sung with the most enthusiastic of them, of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to Him. Oh, that somebody had told me this before, “Trust Christ, and you shall be saved.” . . .

Many days of Christian experience have passed since then, but there has never been one which has had the full exhilaration, the sparkling delight which that first day had. I thought I could have sprung from the seat on which I sat, and have called out with the wildest of those Methodist brethren who were present, “I am forgiven! I am forgiven! A monument of grace! A sinner saved by blood!” My spirit saw its chains broken to pieces, I felt that I was an emancipated soul, an heir of Heaven, a forgiven one, accepted in Christ Jesus, plucked out of the miry clay and out of the horrible pit, with my feet set upon a rock, and my goings established. I thought I could dance all the way home.”

When we look on Christ on the cross, we look on he who was, both the sign of our sin and the sign of our salvation. Isaiah sings in advance of all these mysteries:

Who has believed what he has heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

. . .he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief and as one from whom others hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities . . .and with his wounds we are healed.

Was ever love so mighty, so compassionate, or so costly?

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