

Please join me in prayer.

Hide me in your glory, gracious and loving God. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my redeemer, and my refuge. Amen.

Today's passage is a collection of familiar verses. Part of verse 14 is the excerpt of Numbers 21:4-9, when Moses lifted up a serpent on a stick. The serpent on a stick is familiar to those who are in the medical field, or patients who are keen to this detail. An internet article stated that the caduceus could be related to this story. The summary is...The Israelites were once again complaining to Moses about their situation...they were complaining about the lack of food and water. Being in the wilderness was taking a toll on them and they were no longer excited about being free from slavery in Egypt. This made God very unhappy with the chosen people, so God sent poisonous snakes, and the Israelites were dying. They cried out for help to Moses, who in return interceded to God. God instructed Moses to make an image of a poisonous snake to be set on a pole and the only cure of this 'pandemic-like' situation was if they would look up to the image. This image was then 'developed' into a rod with two snakes...also called as the rod of asclepius – the ancient Greek god of healing. Whatever it is called now or however it looked now, it is the symbol of healing. In the story from the book of Numbers, the important part of the healing process is for the infirmed to look at the bronze serpent and the healing will commence. An act that may sound menial and trivial to some of us, but maybe considered powerful to some. This, then makes a lot of sense to be the opening of our passage today. The reference of the healing by just looking at the bronze image makes a strong argument for faith and its gift – the eternal life that can be found in the Son of Man. Let me shift gears for a little bit, and we will circle back to this piece later.

Then, there is another part of this passage that has been familiar with us. In my former circles, it has been called the heart or center of the gospels of Jesus, this is John 3:16. As a young person I accompanied my parents as they go to evangelistic rallies, and this passage is popular in father's preaching. This part of the passage usually is followed by the sinner's prayer. Eternal life is the promise that Christians hold on to. To some of us, this becomes a guiding principle how we live our life. And there is nothing wrong with this faith. In our lives, there are instances that we need to hold on to something that is greater than what we can control and handle. But I would like to invite you to broaden the scope of our consideration. There is no question about the value of John 3:16. This verse gives us a sense of assurance that our faith in Jesus is not in vain. However, we have a tendency to stop at verse 16, and we would forget verse 17, which expands the sphere of God's love. In fact, verse 17 is a validation of a more compassionate and loving God, the exact opposite of a wrathful God that is sometimes preached when talking about Christianity and why we need to have a relationship with God and Jesus Christ. As I reflect deeper into this, it brings me to different insight of how faith and grace in my own spiritual journey.

There is no doubt that this passage has direct inclinations of the call to the exclusivity of Christianity. It is established and clarified that the Son of Man that is mentioned here is Jesus and the saving that he offers is the eternal life. Furthermore, it was also determined that if we are not to believe in Jesus, condemnation is upon us as mentioned in verse 18. But if I am to think about a loving and merciful God that extends love and mercy to all that God created, I have to reconcile the condemnation that will be

upon those who do not believe in God and in Jesus Christ. I find it problematic that God will condemn those that created because they do not believe Jesus Christ. In order to understand and reconcile the themes of this passage, let us try to understand the context of John – the author of the gospel. John, according to New Testament scholars is one of the disciples of Jesus. He was in fact part of the inner circle of Christ. He, too, was a Jew, like Jesus and they were faithful followers of the ancient Jewish tradition. With this relationship, John, also known as the beloved, knew and understood Jesus and his ministry as it unfolded. One major light bulb moment for me is this, John was not geared into converting the people to Christianity. If we are to look at the message of this passage from the context of the time that it was written, the allusion of verse 14-15 from Numbers 21: 8 about eternal life is about the saving or healing. These themes encompass the grace that was given to us...or as the Wesleyan tradition calls it – prevenient grace. This grace is purely from God, there are no human component needed to accomplish grace. It is all God's work in and for all of us. The healing that the bronze serpent demonstrates and the salvation that Jesus offers is encompassed in God's abundant grace for all of us – people and all beings. Of course, in order for the healing to be completed, there is also human component that should be added into the mix. Otherwise, the healing and salvation will not be completed without the recipient. The Israelites will not experience healing and life if they did not look at the image of serpent, in the same manner that we will not experience the salvation that Jesus Christ offer if we do not our part of looking at him, his life, ministry and teachings. And this is where faith comes in. Faith is a word that gives us both comfort and uneasiness sometimes. The dictionary says, faith means complete trust or confidence in something or someone. And it makes totally sense in both situations. In the Numbers passage, it was clear that without the Israelites' complete trust or confidence in the bronze image, there was no healing...which is the same predicament for us and in our relationship with Christ. I know that this perspective is usually said than done.

Having all of these laid down, what should our response then, be? One interesting landscape that we can look at in this passage is the understanding of the world and its condemnation. This passage was written at a time that the land was under the oppression of the Roman Empire. The people at that time were distracted with the challenges that they are facing. Adding to the fact that they are confused about the identity and presence of Jesus. Is he supposed to save them from the suffering that they are experiencing because he was called the Messiah? Because of all of these challenges, they have forgotten about the intimate communion with God and with each other. And this is the darkness that is talked about in verses 19-21. The light that John was talking about was for people to realize that Jesus was calling for all of them to realize and embody God's love to each other. So, for John, the scope of faith and grace is not limited to our own spiritual journey, but also where God's grace given to us and our faith with God takes us. I mentioned perfecting grace last week, and this is one example that we can embody. As we continue the journey of the cross this Lenten season, we are called to continue to fully accept the abundant grace that is gifted to us, and then edify our faith with the actions that we do for those who are around us – people and other creation of God. The essence of faith and grace should not be confined to our personal relationship with God and Jesus Christ, but it should reflect on how we live and exemplify this love to the world. May it be so. Amen.