

## *Eyes of Faith*

March 10, 2024

Today's message is somewhat straightforward; it has to do with what eyes of faith focus upon. Last week's message was *Foundational Focus*, and so there's a bit of overlap in the theme. Our eyes guide us to where we are going, they indicate to others what we are looking at and perhaps thinking about, and then there's that thing about making eye contact.

There are many ways we could explore about how our eyes work, but since Tanner is here this morning I'm going to have to tell a story about his mom, our daughter Lisa. When she was his age she was frequently running into things; then we began to observe what her eyes were doing when she was walking and realized that when most of us move into a given space, our eyes go there first...Well Lisa, she often tried to move into spaces well before her eyes did and so she kept slamming into things and tripping over stuff...

But enough about Lisa; the point for us today in regards to scripture is what eyes of faith focus upon. They look up to God, like this woman in the image on the screen, sometimes literally, more often figuratively. When our eyes, or maybe more importantly our hearts, are clearly focused on God and Godly things then our perspective on what is going on around us should be different than the average person.

The other day John helped me put away that big Orange ladder that's been laying around the Church for too long. There's a place for it to hang out in the garage building across the parking lot so we carried it over there. The big doors open from the inside, so he had to wait while I ran around to go in the other end to unlatch them. As I turned the corner, I froze for a moment because there was something on the ground- fortunately my eyes were leading me or I would have stepped on it.

*What do you think it was?* It was a snake, do any of you like snakes?... The word for it is *Ophidiophobia* – it is the #1 fear of 51% of all adults. Now, women have this fear more than men – 63% of women are ophidiophobics while only 38% of men are. *Ophidiophobia* comes from the Greek word ὄφις which refers to snakes – it even sounds like a snake, ophissss; and of course we know what a φοβία is.

Part of our ophidiophoba, humanity's fear of snakes, originates right at the beginning, when the snake deceived Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden. I'm pretty sure that after they were put out of Eden, Eve became the first woman to run screaming at the sight of a snake...

Today's Old Testament lesson provides another example of people's tenuous relationship with snakes; The story finds the Israelites still wandering in the wilderness with Moses & Aaron. Up to this point in their travels, they've had many incidents of severe grumbling against their leaders.

1. In Numbers 11 they had complained that God's manna wasn't enough, so it was supplemented with quail.
2. In Numbers 14 they complained that taking possession of the land of Canaan would be too hard.
3. In Numbers 16 Korah the Levite led a large group to complain that they were just as holy as Moses & Aaron, and the Lord swallowed them and their families up into the earth.
4. In Numbers 20 they complained that there wasn't enough water, so Moses struck a rock at Meribah and water gushed forth.

In all of these grumbling & murmuring stories, God showed his ability to provide but coupled it with penalties for doubting him. Which brings us to today's story where they complain once more and get snakes in return:

*Numbers 21:4-9 They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way;<sup>5</sup> they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"*

*<sup>6</sup> Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.*

*<sup>8</sup> The Lord said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live."<sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.*

>>> What were the people's eyes looking to at the beginning of this story? (their misery) The venomous snake story isn't as well-known as so many of the other Exodus stories, but it was an important lesson for the Israelites and I suspect it left an impression of them for generations, maybe it is another reason so many people are afraid of snakes.

The problem in the wilderness for them was that their eyes kept wavering from their faith. The solution was for Moses to fashion this bronze snake on a pole. The only way the people could live was to gaze upon the snake which Moses lifted up for their eyes to see. This story isn't as well-known as many others, but it is integral to something Jesus said right before He said those famous words in John 3:16.

It was in the first year in Jesus' ministry and the Pharisee Nicodemus had come to him under the cover of darkness to ask what he needed to do to gain eternal life. Nicodemus knew the bronze snake story well, so this is what Jesus said to him:

*John 3:14-15 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up<sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.*"

>>> Nicodemus got that imagery better than when Jesus had told him that he had to be born again to gain eternal life, and with that called to attention, Jesus was able to say what has become the most well-known of all the red letter words in the Bible:

*John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* (scroll through pages on cue)

>>> We could spend some time talking about the faith of Tim Tebow (do you know who he is?), he is one who definitely has shown himself to have eyes of faith that are looking to the right things. He was a quarterback and if you know much about football you know that as a play unfolds, the best defenders are watching closely to see what the quarterback's eyes are doing.

And Tim Tebow made them look at this scripture reference. I wonder how many defenders had their faith deepened by looking at his eyes? Now back to Jesus and Nicodemus; they're still thinking about the bronze snake story – what should God have done to the Israelites for all their continued grumbling and murmuring when he had shown through Moses and Aaron how faithful and trustworthy He was?...(pit of despair)

Yet God did not give them what they deserved, he gave a wonderful opportunity to those with eyes of faith that would look to him. *That's amazing grace, how many of us could be that gracious? ...* Fortunately for us while God has every right to condemn the world, he again and again chooses to provide the opportunity to receive grace. That's the justice and mercy tension we have to navigate again. During the Exodus, God provided the bronze snake as the opportunity for life anew, and here in this conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus explains how God now provides a new pathway to abundant life:

*John 3: 17-21 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.<sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.<sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.<sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.<sup>21</sup> But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.*

>>> *What do eyes of faith look to?...* in John 3:14 Jesus said *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.* What if people held up signs that said John 3:14? Most people are not as informed as Nicodemus or you, so they probably wouldn't get it.

But what people *do get* is John 3:16 which tells us that our eyes of faith should be fixed upon the cross of Jesus. *Did I say that means both literally and figuratively?* Just when I wrote that the sermon music mix on my computer started playing the song *Open the Eyes of My Heart*. Maybe I should have planned to play that for us at this point, but another song was already cued up.

This is a deeply faithful woman from the bayous of Louisiana singing a well-known song, you can sing along if you like: (Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus)

>>> Nicodemus being a Pharisee thought that there must be some things he had to *do* to inherit eternal life and Jesus made it clear that the only thing we need to *do* is turn our eyes of faith to Jesus. The rest of things that happen in the lives of Christians are *responses* to the joy we experience when we know that we are covered by the grace of God and want to be faithful disciples.

When I was a young man in college, someone in the mall asked my friend and I what we thought we needed to do in order to be saved. Since we both had been raised in the same Church, we began listing some of the things we lived out as Christians. Then this guy opened our hearts to a wonderful passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians which has become a guiding force for my own eyes of faith:

*Ephesians 2:1-10* As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,<sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.<sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.<sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,<sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.<sup>6</sup> And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,<sup>7</sup> in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.<sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast.<sup>10</sup> For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

>>> Those last three verses are ones to remember whenever you want to sum up your faith; *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

Do yourself, write them down or mark them in your Bible at home. Grace is the gift of God, not something we earn. Yet when we turn our eyes of faith upon Jesus, I pray that we can't but help to do the good works of our Lord Jesus Christ so that his gospel, mission, and ministry may be carried on through us. Amen.