

Come into God's light

10 March 2024 – Lent 4

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

I want to talk about a special word today. But you're going to have to do some detective work to find out what this word is ...

I've got some clues to help you ...

- The word is used as a girl's name
- If you move easily we might say that you move with ...
- It can be used to describe God ... we might begin a prayer 'God of ...'
- It's the name of a prayer we say before meals

The word is **grace!**

Grace is when we love someone or do something for someone even **when they don't deserve it.**

God's grace is when God continues to love us and forgive us and care for us even when **we** don't deserve it.

Today's two stories from the Bible are about grace. In the first story, God's people are complaining that God isn't looking after them very well. When snakes appear and start biting people, they cry out to God to save them – and God provides a way to save them from the snakes.

The other story suggests that people can be afraid of God because God sometimes appears stern and so they effectively try and hide from God. But God's response is to send Jesus with the message that God loves everybody.

BIBLE READINGS

Your word, O God, is a lamp to our feet,
and a light to our path.

Numbers 21:4-9

The Israelites travelled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go round Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; 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 wretched

manna!'

Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 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.

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.' 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.

John 3:14-21

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.'

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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 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. This is the verdict: light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. 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.

Lord, may your word live in us
and bear much fruit to your glory.

MESSAGE Come into God's light

What is God like?

Based on today's Gospel reading with its well-known line about God's love for the world, we might think that it's a settled question.

But based on the stories and witness of Scripture, God's character is complex ... loving, merciful, forgiving, powerful, relational, just, gracious, trustworthy, faithful ...

... but God's character is also holy, demanding, angry, jealous, mysterious, uncaring, absent, stern, judgmental ...



If we just take the first set of words, God would appear to be completely loving, trustworthy and reliable, someone you want in your corner, someone who always provides what you need.

But there are other sides to God that Israel experienced. These included God's holiness that demands certain attitudes and behaviours be followed lest there be significant consequences. God could at times appear jealous or angry or be frustratingly absent. At other times God could be downright mysterious.

At times, it's fair to say that Israel struggled to hold these different aspects of God together. As do many Christians.

Now there is a saying that it takes two to tango. So when we think about God and having relationship with God, there is also the human side to consider. We could draw up a similar list of human attributes that help or hinder our relationship with God.

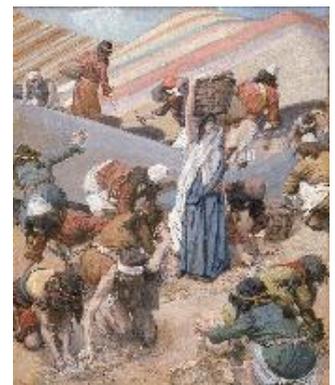
On the positive side we might note that people can be loving, faithful, kind, generous, merciful, patient and so forth. Often these characteristics shine forth most strongly in the wake of natural disasters when communities come together to help each other out. They are also seen in many families.

But there is also a darker side to human nature that lurks in each one of us if we are completely honest. This darker side suggests that we can be selfish, jealous, cruel, domineering, uncaring, arrogant, vengeful and so forth.

It is this side of human nature that leads to conflicts and wars, to breakdowns in family relationships, to inequality and a me-first attitude.

Both the light and more ambiguous aspects of God's character and the light and dark aspects of human nature are on display in our readings today.

The first story from Numbers is one of several stories that describe the wanderings of the Israelites after their escape from Egypt. They are no longer slaves but have discovered that the grass is not always greener on the other side of the fence. They are living in the wilderness and there is no food and often not enough water. God has provided manna for the people to eat that must be scraped off the ground each morning.



Their whole existence seems difficult and repetitive, and dreams of the Promised Land seem just a mirage. To put it mildly, the people are unhappy ... they are finding life very difficult. But they also seem to be forgetting that it is God's provision that is keeping them alive.

What do we tend to do when things are not going well? We find someone to complain to, in this case Moses, the leader of the people. There's not enough water for our stock, there's no decent food and we're totally sick of manna. The story says that they also grumble against God



and are quite possibly thinking that after dramatic shows of power in Egypt, God is now absent, uncaring and untrustworthy. The people have lost faith in God and lost trust in Moses.

I wonder how often we complain or grumble like this in our church communities? Do we find it difficult to give our struggles over to God?

The next part of the story is really challenging. It reads that God sent vipers among the people – venomous snakes – that bit the people, many of whom died. The way that the story is written, it is God's choice to inflict harm and death on the people. This shows the apparently harsh, judgmental side of God, the aspect of God's character that many Christians and many of our contemporaries struggle to grapple with.



We are used to thinking of God as loving and kind, and these actions seem anything but loving and kind.

Perhaps our inability to hand our grievances over to God is 'poisonous' – a bit like the poison of the snakes in the story. We get caught up in the darkness and difficulty of what is going on, rather than focusing on the light – the places of blessing and hope that are also present amongst us. We easily focus on what we find annoying and forget or gloss over what is good.

But the story is not finished yet. Moses prays to God and God provides a solution. Make a bronze snake, Moses, and put it on a high pole. When the people are bitten they can look at the bronze snake and live.



This seems a little weird and also a little magical. What's going on?

It seems that God has not abandoned the people after all and is providing a way that brings life out of death. God is showing grace to the people, undeserved favour.

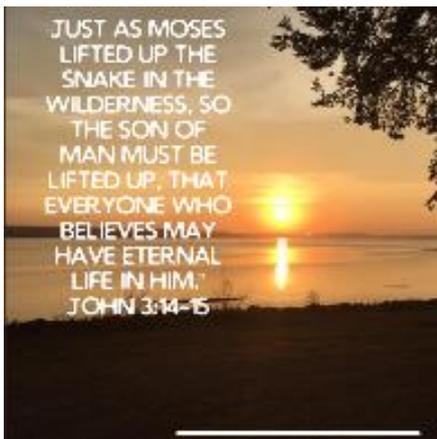
But there's also a visual lesson here. It was the peoples' complaining that brought the snakes and their venom. In order to live, the people must look up at the bronze snake and be reminded that their sin – both the grumbling and their lack of trust in Moses and in God – brought the snakes. The bronze snake also reminds them of God's grace.

This brings us to the famous passage in John's Gospel.

The passage begins with Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night, when it is dark. He fails to comprehend Jesus' message about the need to be born again or born from above in order to enter the kingdom of God. What's needed according to Jesus is nothing less than a complete change of mindset that only God's Spirit can accomplish. It's like a new birth.



Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus then transitions seamlessly into a broader discussion about the role of Jesus in God's plans.

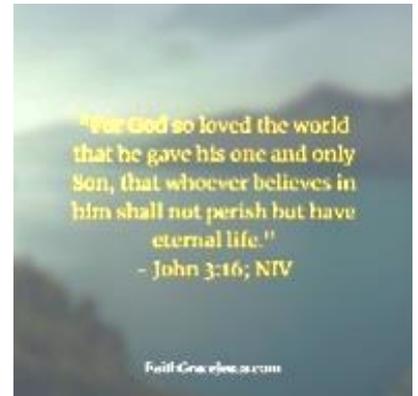


Just like Moses lifted up the serpent on the tall pole to bring life out of death, so too the Son of Man – Jesus – must be lifted up so that those who believe in him should not die but have eternal life.

This is a clear reference to Jesus being lifted up on the cross and probably also being lifted up from death through the resurrection and lifted up or exalted to God through his eventual ascension.

The aim and purpose of Jesus' life and death and resurrection – his mission in the world – is to bring life – eternal life – to people.

This mission of Jesus is grounded in God's love for the world. Although people are fickle and capable of both good and evil, God loves the whole world and its people. The clearest sign of this love is the sending of Jesus into the world and then his death and resurrection as foreshadowed here.



As in the story of God bringing life out of death through the bronze snake, here too is God's grace in action, bringing life out of death through Jesus.

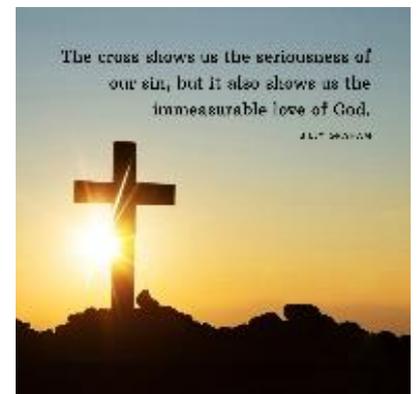


As in much of John's Gospel, there is a black and white choice set before us. God offers life and light and salvation, but this demands a response of trust in Jesus and his mission.

The alternative – rejecting Jesus and his mission – leads to death and darkness and condemnation. Sadly according to John, many people choose this grim alternative because they are fearful that God's light will expose their evil deeds. And so they remain in the dark.

Perhaps the cross is a visual reminder similar to the bronze snake on the pole. It is a reminder of humanity's sin and evil – including our own – that made Jesus' death on the cross necessary.

It is also a reminder that God's love and grace bring life even through death, and that Jesus' death on the cross points us to God's love. Thus the cross holds up a mirror to us.



We are called to come into God's light.

We are called to embrace the truth of God's love.

We are offered the gift of eternal life through trusting in Jesus.

But the story also points to the uncomfortable truth that the world is often a dark place. One only has to watch the news or look at social media. As individuals we can become inward-looking, anxious or depressed, encouraging us to remain in the dark.

What's the alternative to dwelling in the dark?

To continually come into God's light – every day – and to choose the way of kindness and generosity and compassion, to live out the balancing aspects of God's character of love, holiness and justice.

LENT CANDLE LITURGY

On this fourth Sunday of Lent,
we remember that Jesus was lifted up on the cross
to bring new life and fresh hope.

**We too are called to find our resilience
in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.**

As we extinguish this candle of resilience
**we recall the foundation of our strength,
the source of God's peace in the world.**