

East Durham Methodist Circuit:

Service 27th March

Prepared by Rev Alf Waite

Theme: Looking up.

Call to Worship:

You draw us to yourself, Jesus, We look up to you, who was lifted up to save us, and we respond to your gracious call. Now we come to lift you up in our praise, to offer you our lives in worship. Empower us by your Spirit to keep our eyes fixed on you and fill us with a vision of your glory.

Hymn: Lord, I lift Your name on high

Rick Founds

StF 332

Lord, I lift Your name on high
Lord, I love to sing Your praises
I'm so glad You're in my life
I'm so glad You came to save us

You came from Heaven to earth to show the way
From the earth to the cross my debt to pay
From the cross to the grave
From the grave to the sky
Lord, I lift Your name on high. **Repeat**

A Prayer of Praise:

Oh, thank God - He's so good! His love never runs out.

God of challenging presence and comforting promises, God of uncomfortable truth and liberating love, we praise You for the light of Your Spirit that reveals our brokenness and makes healing possible.

We praise You for the example of Your incarnated life that reveals our true humanity and calls us to live up to it.

We praise You for the Promised Land of Your Reign and Rule which confronts injustice in us and in our world and presses us to participate in its liberating purpose.

Triune God, we praise You!

Amen

A Prayer of Confession:

If we're honest God, we would prefer not to be honest. We would prefer to pretend that we're completely fine, whole, and kind and good in every way.

We would prefer to keep our brokenness hidden; our darkness concealed our evil masked behind our minty-fresh smiles.

But healing cannot be found that way. And so, we seek to own our poison, to admit that we are not the people we want to be, we deceive ourselves and deny our sinfulness, we deceive others and bring them grief and harm.

**Forgive us that we so often choose denial over deliverance.
Help us to admit where we need Your forgiveness and healing, and to make right
where we have done others wrong. In Jesus' name. Amen**

Silence

As Moses lifted a bronze snake on a pole in the desert, so that those who had been poisoned could be healed, So Jesus was lifted on the cross, so that we could know the truth of these words of grace: You are forgiven. Live in peace. **Amen**

Reading: Numbers 21:4-9 New International Version

⁴They travelled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵ 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!"

⁶ Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷ 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.

⁸ 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." ⁹ 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.

Hymn: In the Cross of Christ I glory John Bowring **H&P 167**

1. In the cross of Christ I glory,
towering o'er the wrecks of time;
all the light of sacred story
gathers round its head sublime.

3. When the sun of bliss is beaming
light and love upon my way,
from the cross the radiance streaming
adds more lustre to the day.

2. When the woes of life overtake me,
hopes deceive and fears annoy,
never shall the cross forsake me.
Lo! it glows with peace and joy.

4. Bane and blessing, pain and
pleasure,
by the cross are sanctified;
peace is there that knows no measure,
joys that through all time abide.

Reading: John:12-21 New International Version

¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

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. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹ 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.

Message:

Looking Up

There is a poison in me. It's the same poison that lives inside of abusers and bullies, killers and criminals. I know it's there because I have seen it and it terrified me. As a new father, when my first son was just a baby, I was left alone to care for him one day while my wife went out to get some necessary chores done. At first all was well, but then the time came for him to sleep. He was clearly tired and so I made sure he was clean and well fed, and I put him down in his cot, expecting him to fall asleep in a few minutes as usual. But, this time, for no reason I could fathom, he became increasingly tetchy. I double-checked the status of his nappy, offered him a new bottle, tried to burp him, but it was all in vain. Finally, I decided to leave him for a while, hoping it was just over-tiredness and that he would eventually cry himself to sleep. But the crying didn't stop, and the sleep didn't come. I felt myself moving from concern to frustration to despair. Finally, after what felt like hours, something inside of me snapped. I burst into his room, and grabbed him from his cot, and that's when I saw it - the evil lurking in my soul. In my anger, I had felt ready to throw him across the room, but at the last minute, instead of throwing him, I hugged him to my chest, breathing heavily with tears rolling down my face.

Once I was sure I had calmed down, I slowly laid him back in his bed and waited until he fell asleep at last. When my wife came home, I told her never to leave me alone with him again. I said that I couldn't trust myself, and that I was terrified of what I felt I had nearly done. Thankfully, she just laughed, explained that we all feel like this at times, and assured me that she had no concerns about leaving me alone with my son again - which she did many times over the years with no incident. But in spite of that, I knew that something in me had changed. Never again would I be able to point a dismissive finger at parents who injure their children. I could never condone child abuse, but I would always know that, in a different set of circumstances, it could have been me. I had glimpsed a potentially destructive poison inside of me and I felt that I would have to spend my life working to eradicate it. Of one thing I was absolutely certain though: trying to deny it would only give it more power and keep me from the wholeness I sought.

The Destructive Power of Denial

Of all the destructive forces in our world, one that is seldom effectively addressed is denial. In South Africa we watched in horror a few years ago as our government denied, against all the evidence of science, that AIDS was caused by the HIV virus. Lives were lost and the fight against the disease was set back by years as a result. In a similar way, denial of climate change continues to hinder efforts to bring about the needed changes in how we use our planet's resources and how we power our society. The Church is no stranger to denial either. The refusal to admit or deal effectively with sexual scandals, including cases of paedophilia, has brought great suffering on those who have been preyed upon and on the families of perpetrators, and it has not helped the cause of Christ at all.

But while it's always easy to point out the flaws and blind spots in others, it's far more difficult to admit our own personal denial of our worst selves. In my years as a pastoral counsellor the one thing that grieved me more than any other was to see relationships

break down, families ripped apart and individuals self-destruct simply because someone refused to get honest with themselves and recognise the brokenness and evil within them that was making healing impossible. Yet, to a greater or lesser degree, unless we deliberately and ruthlessly work, along with a loving committed community of friends or family, we all fall prey to the disease of denial - and we all know the pain that results.

When we can find a way to break the cycle of denial, to face our darkness honestly, we open ourselves to a liberating power that is truly remarkable. This is the reason, I believe, that the first step in twelve-step programs is for the person to admit that their life has become unmanageable, essentially to admit that they have a problem, a poison, that is destroying them and their loved ones. It is because we need to break the cycle of denial in our world that whistle-blowers are such important people. Denial fosters corruption. Openness and transparency keep our leaders honest. Denial allows our poison to control and destroy us. Healing comes when we face our darkness and bring it into the light. Until we admit our darkness, we can never be free. Which brings us to today's Old Testament reading.

Owning Your Poison

After nearly forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the people of Israel had finally begun to glimpse again the borders of the Promised Land. Yet even here, they started to hearken back to Egypt. What made this even more ridiculous was that this was an almost entirely new generation. The wilderness wanderings were intended to ensure that the old generation that had refused to believe the good report of Joshua and Caleb would die out. Apart from the two faithful spies, no one of the old generation was to enter the Promise Land. Now, this had happened. Both Aaron and Miriam had already died and Moses knew that he wouldn't be entering the Land either. But, somehow, this new generation, most of whom would never have lived in Egypt, or at least would have had little or no memory of it, were now getting all nostalgic about the land of their parents' slavery. Where they got this romantic view of their oppressive homeland is no secret - it could only have been passed on to them by parents who had learned to forget the pain of their past, who had denied the evil they had experienced, and who wanted to avoid the difficulties of the wilderness. Now, the generation that had no experience of Egypt was glorifying it because of the hardships of their nomadic life.

On previous occasions when the people had complained of hunger or thirst, God had graciously provided for them. But now, after years of proof that God would provide, when the people insisted on complaining and romanticising Egypt, God sent a wake-up call. The time of denial was over, the time to admit what they were denying had come, and God forced them to face their poison in a very literal way - he sent venomous snakes among the people. What is significant about these snakes is that they are referred to as **hannechashim hasseraaphim**. The word **seraphim** can refer to venom, to flame or fire (as in a fiery bite), or to wings. The winged serpent was a symbol of an Egyptian goddess of the underworld, which may indicate that whatever it was that afflicted the Israelites, it was intended to evoke the oppression and the suffering of Egypt. The snakes are both the symbol of the people's longing and a reminder of the truth of what they were hearkening back to. It would have been very hard to glorify Egypt again after this rude reminder.

But then, when the people begged for healing, God sent a cure in a very surprising way. He instructed Moses to create a bronze replica of a snake and to lift it up on a pole. Then, those who were bitten need only look up at the snake to be healed. The

poison had become its own healing! But the one requirement was for the people to acknowledge their affliction. Looking up at the snake on the pole was at once an admission that they had been bitten by a snake and an admission that it was their own longing for Egypt that had brought this on them. If anyone tried to deny their guilt, or find healing without looking up at the snake they would have died of the poison coursing through their veins. Healing could only come when they were willing to recognise and admit what was killing them - when they were ready to own their poison. The principle is the same for snake bite serums today and for the healing of any destructive condition of the soul. Until we are willing to look up and own our poison, we will continue to be consumed by it. But, when we reject our tendency toward denial and admit our need, healing can be found.

There's a good reason why Jesus picks up this image in his conversation with Nicodemus to describe his coming death. The cross was the Empire's favoured method of execution for those who opposed its power. It was deliberately cruel, humiliating and drawn out. The idea was to make the deterrent so strong that conquered nations would think more than twice before launching a rebellion. But at the same time, the cross belied the true nature of the Empire. It could not win people over by goodness and generosity, even with the **Pax Romana** in place. The conquests of Rome were for the sake of Rome and the way this unjust, oppressive system was sustained was through cruelty and violence. In the wake of Roman occupation, love and goodness were helpless casualties and all that was left was the dark threat of imperial power.

But, as Jesus embraces the cross, the poison becomes its own healing. As Jesus submits to the nails and the humiliation, the cross becomes not just a symbol of human cruelty and evil, but also of divine love and compassion. The cross which reveals the true nature of evil also reveals the true nature of God. It reflects God's glory and, as Jesus predicts, it draws all people to him. The cross, and the resurrection which follows, demonstrate that God is able to triumph over our poison and bring life out of death, goodness out of evil, justice out of injustice, and peace out of violence. All that is required now is for us to own our poison and look up at the cross for our healing. If we refuse to admit that we are infected by the same evil that created crucifixion, we will never look up at the crucified Jesus, and we will remain in our poisoned state. But, when we acknowledge that we cannot save ourselves, that we need a divine intervention to detoxify us, then we will look up at the dying man, and receive what we need to be healed.

Jesus preached that God's Reign is "at hand". This means that we all live on the borders of the Promised Land. But it is here that the snakes attack us. If we continue to long for Egypt, for the power-games, material wealth, and immediate gratification of our addictions that our human systems claim to offer, we will die in the wilderness. But, if we turn our gaze upwards to the one thing that can break the power of the poison in us - the snake on the pole, the crucified Christ - we will receive eternal life. The best translation for the abundant, vibrant, God-filled life that Jesus promised is literally the 'life of the ages'. It took the Israelites eighteen months to go from the snake episode to the Promised Land. For us the journey can take a moment. As soon as we own our poison and look up, we step into the Promise Land of God's Reign.

Choosing to Look Up

Once we recognise that "our lives have become unmanageable", as the twelve step programs put it, and we stop longing for what poisons us, we are able to heed the call to look up. In a sense, the whole Lenten journey is about learning how to make the

choice to gaze on the crucified One and trust that he is the way to our healing. This looking up has two parts to it and they both need to be practiced regularly to keep us whole.

The first part is repentance. That's essentially what it means to 'own your poison'. We have explored repentance already in this Lenten season, but since it's at the heart of the journey, and of our faith, it's a good idea to revisit it again from a different perspective. Repentance here is about doing the work to recognise what it is in our own hearts and lives that poison us and others. When we are able to break our own personal cycle of denial and take honest stock of our attitudes and actions, we will soon see the signs of the poison in us. If we have the courage and the wisdom to engage a trusted group of friends in this work, so much the better. This is one of the reasons why I believe that spirituality must be done in community. It often takes the loving objectivity of another to reveal the truth about our brokenness and evil, and to coax us to real honesty and repentance. As hard and painful as this is, it's the only way to healing and life.

But sometimes what poisons us is not just our own personal evil, but that of the systems in which we participate. In some ways it is easier to examine our society because we can distance ourselves from it. But if we embrace the same ruthless honesty we use on ourselves, we will discover that the poison of injustice often finds its way into our souls as well. It can require great courage and discipline to acknowledge our compliance with the unjust systems of our world and to own our responsibility to help change these poisonous structures.

The work of repentance would be a futile exercise in despair if we did not continue into the second part of the 'looking up' process. Once we have acknowledged the evil within us and our society, we can move into a faith choice: the decision to take Jesus at his word and to believe that the ways of God's Reign really are the Promised Land and really do lead us to life. This means that we have to stop believing that life can be found in 'Egypt'. We need to learn to release the longings of our hearts for what poisons us and to stop glorifying the systems and ways of being that have oppressed and hurt us. Then, we are free to embrace a new way of being and act on the principles, values, and practices of God's Reign. It may sound ironic, but the life that we long for is found by following Jesus on the same road that has brought us healing: sacrificial love. It is usually when we stop focussing on our own quest for life and start giving ourselves to bring life to others that eternal life is actually found.

Your focus becomes your reality

It's a simple truth that what you focus on becomes your reality. The Israelites who kept looking at the snakes around their feet, remained poisoned by them. Those who shifted their focus to the bronze snake on the pole found healing. But, for the generations that followed, this bronze snake became its own form of poison. Over time, the people began to believe that it was the snake that healed them and they shifted their focus from the God who had used the snake as an instrument to the instrument itself. This bronze snake became an idol, an object of worship that drew people away from God's life and poisoned their souls. In the end, King Hezekiah had to destroy the snake in order to get the people to lift their gaze still higher - to the God who loved and saved them (See 2 Kings 18:4). The same principle applies to us. As long as we gaze on the promises and primping of Empire, in whatever form it may take in our situation, we will remain enslaved by it. It is only as we look higher, to the crucified and resurrected Christ, that we are healed and liberated.

As Richard Rohr rightly reflects, we become like the God we worship. If we worship the gods of 'Egypt' or 'Rome' we will only become more and more like them and their poison will grow stronger in our hearts. When we turn our worship to Jesus though, the glory and freedom of sacrificial love and liberating life is ours. And then we become 'little incarnations' that others can look to in order to find healing in their turn. The choice is ours: will we cling to our denial, or will we own our poison, look up, and find the healing we long for?

Hymn: **All my hope on God is founded** R. Bridges (fm. J Neander) **StF 455 / H&P 63**

1. All my hope on God is founded;
he doth still my trust renew,
me through change and chance he
guideth,
only good and only true.
God unknown, he alone
calls my heart to be his own.

2. Mortal pride and earthly glory,
sword and crown betray our trust;
though with care and toil we build them,
tower and temple fall to dust.
But God's power, hour by hour,
is my temple and my tower.

3. God's great goodness e'er endureth,
deep his wisdom, passing thought:
splendor, light and life attend him,

beauty springeth out of naught.
Evermore from his store
newborn worlds rise and adore.

4. Daily doth the almighty Giver
bounteous gifts on us bestow;
his desire our soul delighteth,
pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand at his hand;
joy doth wait on his command.

5. Still from earth to God eternal
sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising
for the gift of Christ, his Son.
Christ doth call one and all:
ye who follow shall not fall.

Prayers of Intercession:

Like the Israelites wandering in the desert, we need your wisdom, your guidance and your care.

Like the people of Israel waiting for a Messiah, we need your liberating message and your renewing mission.

And so we pray:

For all those who believe that the way to power, wealth, and happiness is through denial, secrecy, and misdirection, that truth and transparency will flood our world.

For all those who are quick to complain about the poisons in others, but refuse to own their own poison, *that repentance and reconciliation will become our habits.*

For all those who find it impossible to hope, to dream or to believe, because their eyes are forever pulled downward by their circumstances or their fear, that our eyes will be lifted to find faith and possibility in you.

Heal us, O God;

Free us, O God;

And bring us into the Promised Land of your grace and love through Jesus our Healer
Amen

We join our prayer together as we say the Lord's prayer:

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.
Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done - on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory,
For ever and ever.**

Amen

Hymn: Go forth and tell J E Seddon H&P 770

1. Go forth and tell! O Church of God, awake!
God's saving news to all the nations take:
Proclaim Christ Jesus, Saviour, Lord and King,
That all the world His worthy praise may sing.

2. Go forth and tell! God's love embraces all;
He will in grace respond to all who call:
How shall they call if they have never heard
The gracious invitation of His word?

3. Go forth and tell! men still in darkness lie;
In wealth or want, in sin they live and die:
Give us, O Lord, concern of heart and mind,
A love like Yours which cares for all mankind.

4. Go forth and tell! the doors are open wide:
Share God's good gifts – let no one be denied;
Live out your life as Christ your Lord shall choose,
Your ransomed powers for His sole glory use.

5. Go forth and tell! O church of God, arise!
Go in the strength which Christ your Lord supplies;
Go till all nations His great name adore
And serve Him, Lord and King forevermore

Benediction:

And so God as you have freed us from our denial and from all that poisons us. So may we help others to find truth and freedom in your love;

As you were lifted up for our sakes, Jesus, So may we become those to whom others look for grace and healing;

As you have led us into the Promised Land of God's Reign, Jesus,

So may we lead others into your realm of light. In your name, we pray. **Amen.**