

Gary L. Bagley  
Hilton Presbyterian Church  
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*Seeking the Truth—The Discipline of Vision*  
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

Like most boys, I grew up admiring my father to the point of thinking he was part god. I thought he was the smartest man in the world and the greatest hunter I knew. I also thought that Georgia was the finest state of all, that Georgia Tech had the superior football team to any in the nation, anytime. And, that the Baptist Church was better than the Methodist Church down the street. (In Buford, there was no Episcopal Church, Catholic Church, or United Church of Christ at the time, and the Presbyterian Church was so small it didn't count. However, half of its membership today is made up of recovering Baptists. The Church of God was too out of control to be taken seriously.) "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, it was time to put away childish things and childish thinking..." Giving up those childhood beliefs was rather difficult. Or rather, coming to realize that some of the things I believed were not exactly true and never had been was difficult. Facing the truth is not only a challenge for children and teenagers; it also is for adults, and sometimes more so.

We usually don't like what we don't understand. That's how the Church made one of its most obvious mistakes in 1633. It made plenty before that, and has made plenty since. The issue back then was whether we lived in a heliocentric or geocentric universe—whether the sun was the center of the universe, or whether the earth was its center. Scripture certainly supported the latter, as did the Pope. "The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved." (Psalm 93:1) The book of Joshua speaks of the sun and moon remaining unmoved for three days to allow a victory for the Israelites during one of their military battles. Galileo had difficulty accepting this concept and accepting these biblical writings as literally true. He followed the way of St. Augustine regarding interpretation of scripture. Building on the theories of Copernicus, Galileo purported that the sun, rather than the earth, was the center of our universe. He was immediately confronted by the Pope and the church. Galileo was found

“vehemently suspect of heresy,” ordered to be imprisoned (which was commuted to house arrest), and his book, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, was banned and publication of any future books was forbidden. We all make mistakes and most of us don’t like what we don’t understand. But, it took the church until Halloween of 1992 to acknowledge they were wrong and that Galileo was right. Last March (2008), the Vatican proposed to complete its rehabilitation of Galileo by erecting a statue of him *inside* the Vatican walls.

While the Church has been the most ardent advocate of higher education in our nation founding schools like Princeton, Yale, Brown, Emory, and many, many others, it has often found itself on the opposite side of truth with issues like slavery and women’s rights. Though founded by the Great and General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, even Harvard, our nation’s oldest school was named after John Harvard, a young minister who left his library and half of his estate to the institution.

Struggling for the truth is one of the most important spiritual disciplines in which we can engage. Jesus challenged his followers to think and see things as they are. He urged them to love God with all their heart, their souls, their minds, and their strength...while loving neighbors as they love themselves. Paul told his friends in Rome that they were to be transformed by the renewing of their minds.

Today’s gospel text contains, perhaps, the most memorized of all New Testament texts:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

This verse has bookends of a heady discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus about the meaning of spiritual matters on the front end, and on the other end a reminder that

*...those who do what is true come to the light...*

This passage from John gets its footing from an odd passage in the book of Numbers. But the oddity of the passage sheds light for all of us who try to make sense of the gospel:

*...just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...*

The story in Numbers is the last of five “murmuring” stories coming from the Hebrews following Moses through the wilderness to the Promise Land. Over and over, the people complained and rebelled against their leaders in the wilderness. Their complaint against both Moses and God in this fifth account is about having no food and water. What follows is an onslaught of poisonous snakes crawling out of the rocks heading straight for their feet. The snakes are for real. When they bite the people, those people die, which brings the living to their senses. The Hebrews repent of their sins, pleading with Moses to intercede for them with God.

The divine answer to their prayer is what makes this passage so odd. God tells Moses to make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole. Everyone who is bitten by a snake shall look upon it and live.

According to a recent Harris poll on “What We Are Afraid Of,” 36% of all adults in the United States list snakes as their number one fear—49% of women and 22% of men.<sup>1</sup> Most humans have been afraid of snakes since the beginning of our species. Oddly in this story, once the people have recognized their sin and confessed it to Moses, their tormentor becomes their savior. Once Moses makes it possible for them to gaze fully upon what they are afraid of, they gain access to its healing power. Like the caduceus, the Greek/Roman herald’s wand with one or two serpents twined around it and associated with the medical field, this bronze serpent becomes a treasured sign of God’s power to heal. It is not a living snake, nor is it in any sense a sacrifice for the sins of the people. John’s use of this symbol at the beginning of our gospel passage today offers no easy interpretation for those preachers who stress substitutionary atonement. A snake on a pole will cause such to think twice before offering an easy resolution to this mystery of the cross.

What it does is to remind us that those things we fear most may become our point of clarification, healing, and salvation. We can smile at the Church for initially condemning Galileo to death for teaching and proposing a theory of astronomy that is the unquestioned truth today, despite the first century’s

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Homiletical Perspective” from “Fourth Sunday in Lent,” *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press: 2009), 101.

opposing understanding of a three-tiered world and the Bible's repeated description of such—heaven above, the flat earth on which we live, and hell below.

So, what things are we afraid of today? What elements of life do we not understand today that are just as outrageous as geocentrism was in the seventeenth century?

We are afraid of what we don't understand—homosexuality, the Muslim faith, the Jewish faith, new interpretations of the gospels that shed light on the enigmas of first century scripture. If you want a healthy book to read this Lent that will stretch your understanding of Jesus and scripture, read Marcus Borg's *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* or *The Heart of Christianity*. Borg loves Jesus and he loves the church. But, you won't hear what you heard in Sunday School twenty, thirty, forty years ago. What you will hear is theology being interpreted with integrity. If you want to engage in the discipline of study this Lent, read Diana Butler Bass's *Christianity for the Rest of Us*. She points to "Ten Signposts of Renewal" within the mainline churches, discovered in a five-year Lilly Foundation Study. If you want a good Lenten study that challenges your lifestyle and thinking, and stretches your patriotism and worldview, read Fareed Zarkaria's *The Post-American World*.

The mainline churches have been losing members steadily since 1960s. Even the Southern Baptists have been in a decline for the past ten years. The mainline churches must wake up to the fact that what people want and need is more than a social services depot. And at the same time, the offering of spiritual growth and Christian community must be done with intellectual integrity and must go beyond curbside smiles and handshakes. People, especially young adults, want the truth and are willing to struggle to understand the truth. Spirituality is that important in our world—just look at the spirituality section in any bookstore—and seekers who go beyond shallow entertainment won't be satisfied any longer with pat answers that ignore science, modern medicine, and psychology. Jesus would say, "love God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength." The writer of 2 Timothy would say, "Study to show yourself approved unto God...rightly dividing the word of truth." Paul would say, "Finally, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure,

whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

If the Church is to survive the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it must take seriously the value of our faith and not be afraid of asking honest questions...and not be afraid of discovering honest answers. If we, the Church, are to survive the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we must be intentional about re-educating the church and rediscovering the lifestyle that was so contagious in the One we follow. That which we fear might just become our source of healing and salvation. AMEN.

#### **Numbers 21:4-9**

4From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 5The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." 6Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. 8And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." 9So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

#### **John 3:14-21**

14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."