

Topic: Keys to Grace and Spiritual Renewal

Subtopic: Shaking off negativity and hindrances to abundant life

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/OTfmJrM7WwQ>

With an understanding of human nature, our Church fathers made plans for a mid-Lent time of refreshment. Consequently, they named this fourth Sunday of Lent Refreshment Sunday. In their wisdom, the Church fathers knew that we wouldn’t stay with the harsh disciplines of Lent unless we also found joy in the journey.

Therefore, an understanding of grace and God’s love for the world underlines all the readings assigned today. For example, the Gospel comes on the heels of one of the most intriguing personal encounters recorded in the Gospels. It occurred with a highly respected religious ruler named Nicodemus. John describes Nicodemus as “*a man of the Pharisees*,”¹ which meant he was one of the separated ones, an elite lay theologian dedicated to studying and living out every jot and title of the Law. Yet, with all of his religious zeal and training, he had great difficulty understanding that heavenly blessings, such as the new birth, come to us “by grace through faith, and this is not of your own doing, it is a gift of God.”²

In helping Nicodemus take hold of this concept, Jesus uses an example from the Old Testament. “For just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”³ Our lesson today from Numbers highlights how the Israelites “spoke

¹ John 3:1 ESV

² Ephesians 2:9

³ John 3:14-15

against God and Moses, saying, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?’”⁴ The Psalmist commented on this and said, “They detested God in their heart and demanded the food they craved.”⁵ Their words and actions expressed contempt and disbelief in God’s ability and willingness to care for them.

Their disbelief and grumbling resulted in being bitten by “fiery serpents.” The snakes were described as “fiery” because their bite inflicted a burning fever that, if not checked, brought paralysis and death. When they suffered such awful consequences, they repented, and the Lord graciously provided a remedy. Moses was told to make a bronze snake and lift it on a pole. Then, those who looked up at it were cured.

Metaphorically speaking, we have all been bitten by snakes. This past week, I felt like I had been bitten by something that put me out of commission, and the last thing I wanted to be was another one of those grumpy Christians.

In the past, one of the ways that I have busted free of the mulligrubs is by getting in touch with my inner child, who needs to come out and play. This week, Taylor Swift’s creative and energetic music was just the ticket I needed for this playful encounter. Then, when her hit song, “Shake It Off,” came on, the words spoke directly to my need. When Taylor Swift explained the inspiration for that song, she admitted that she, too, had to shake off comments from haters and critics about her life. She wrote that song for the effect it had on me. It got me up,

⁴ Numbers 21:5

⁵ Psalm 78:18

moving, and even dancing. I don’t care if you call me a Swift. It worked.

When the Apostle Paul was shipwrecked on the island of Malta and was bitten by a snake, he quickly shook it off and flung it into the fire. Then, when no misfortune came to him, the natives thought he was a god.

When our Lord was misunderstood, he took everything people said against him as an opportunity to clarify the truth. He came to set people free and make joy possible.

Our N.T. lesson today describes how life without God leads us to destructive tendencies that will ultimately lead to spiritual death. Thankfully, this downward trajectory of human selfishness is completely reversed with the words, “**But God**, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.”⁶

So don’t overcomplicate it. Think of faith in small, bitesize pieces. Martin Luther called John 3:16 “The Gospel in miniature.” Some believe this verse is so concise and powerful that they named it “The Bible in a Nutshell.” So, let’s consider it: one word and phrase at a time. It proclaims:

God—the greatest lover
so loved —the greatest degree
the world —the greatest company
that He gave —the greatest act
His only begotten Son —the greatest gift
that whoever believes —the greatest simplicity
in Him —the greatest person

⁶ Ephesians 2:4-5

should not perish —the greatest rescue
but—the greatest difference
have—the greatest certainty
everlasting life —the greatest possession.

The love of God expressed in this verse has inspired hundreds of hymns, but one of my favorites was written by F. M. Lehmanns. It reads:

The love of God is greater far
Than tongue or pen can ever tell,
It goes beyond the highest star
And reaches to the lowest hell;
The guilty pair bowed down with care,
God gave his Son to win;
His erring child He reconciled,
And pardoned from his sin.
Could we, with ink, the ocean fill
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry,
Nor could the scroll contain the whole
Though stretched from sky to sky.

“Indeed, God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”⁷ So, no matter what other people say or do, let us “shake off” anything that would rob us of joy and the abundant life that is ours in Christ. *Amen*

⁷ John 3:17