



“Looking Up”

BY PASTOR JOHN HILLMER

Alright, take out your cell phones/smart phones/tablets. Really! Now look up: 316. What do you find? *Wikipedia*. *John 3:16 “Gospel in a nutshell”*. *316 game: Tim Tebow* Now while I’m yammering away some of you are probably on Facebook, or texting friends! So put your smart phone away! When we’re looking at our phones, we are buried in the moment! Chatting, surfing, posting, calendaring. Smart phones are fantastic! So resourceful. Where would we be without them? But they also take us away from things: from each other from the moment! There’s a time for USING THEM, and a time for PUTTING THEM AWAY.

My dad never owned a ‘smart phone’. Dad died 10 years ago. But ironically it was my dad who taught me to “Look up”. When I was a boy, we would go for walks. He would often say: “look up”, “See what’s around you”, “enjoy your surroundings – and be alert”, “See what’s ABOVE you – you never know what you might see, and what you might miss if you always have your nose to the ground.” Look Up!

“When walking in public places I am amazed how many people have their eyes firmly affixed to their smartphones, oblivious to what is going on around them. Heads-down, walking around –hardly ever looking up”(from Advent Devotional booklet, 2018. Anita Hans).

Today’s Scripture, “lift up your heads and see; your redemption is near at hand”, seems to address this very phenomenon, even to the last words, at hand. While it is easy to judge; “they need to get a life, or just put the darn thing in their pocket and enjoy God’s creation and the wonderful world around them.” Where do we have our heads? What is our focus? What are we looking at?

Have we ever looked how beautiful our blue skies are and what a gift from God that is each day? We were blessed to be right in the path of the total eclipse this summer and the only thing I could do was cry. What a gift. When light returned everyone clapped – was that thanking God for his constant presence in our lives? (Thank you Anita!)

Are WE watching for the presence of God? Are we watching for the “healing” of God?

Note: Jesus gives notice that we should “Look Up” today. John 3:16 is probably the best known passage in the Bible. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten. . .”* But the ‘set up’, or the reason for it, begins in verse 14:

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so also must the Son of Man be lifted up . . .”

This reference to the cross illuminates the rest of the whole passage.

When something is “SO WELL KNOWN”, it can become “Meh” -- or even trite. So let’s let the cross– this word about the cross - speak for itself and this in two ways. First, note that the reference moves both forward and backward. Not only does the “lifting up” anticipate Jesus’ crucifixion (forward), but also references the story shared in the first lesson from Numbers (21:4-9). Here, God is weary – even aggravated - at the grumbling of the thankless Israelites. So God sends this Exodus-like plague of venomous snakes. It is, to say the least, effective. When the people repent, the Lord commands Moses to make a bronze snake and lift it up on a pole, so that whenever someone is bitten he or she can look to the snake and be healed.

To look ahead to Jesus’ “lifting up” through the lens of this story, the cross is not about punishment or payment but healing and only healing. As the venomous snakes in the desert make the deadly consequences of sin clear as a bell. The bronze snake offers only life. So it is that the consequences of sin in our lives, brings only trouble, while the cross itself is the agent of our salvation and healing. In other words, in this Scripture from “Numbers” – where God tells Moses to fashion snake; lift it up among the people, and anyone who looks to it, will live! -- God is saying: I’ll do the work, but we’ve gotta look for it. God brings the wholeness/healing, but we lean in to it. That is hunger for it; thirst for it.

“Nose to our smartphones” is just the present-day iteration of “Nose to the grindstone” where we get caught up into the immediate. Drawn into the minutiae. Drawn in to the ‘news’ and these days, it’s difficult to tell whether it’s “True” news, or “Fake” news. How to judge what is “true”? Judgment, as it turns out, is about telling the truth.

John 3:19 *“And this is the judgment – that the light has come into to the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light.”*

The Greek word "krisis" (translated here "judgment") is less about the rendering of a verdict, than about a revealing. A "turning point" might be even closer; or "uncover" or "disclose." This helps us to hear the verses after 3:16 as more descriptive than accusatory.

Those who believe that God is love are saved; they look to the One lifted up for healing. Those who cannot imagine that God comes bringing love rather than punishment are lost, lost in their despair, sin, and confusion. The verdict, conclusion, revelation is that we love darkness more than light. That we do not want to admit our need and receive God's grace and forgiveness. We can't imagine God being different than we are. There is something in us that fears being exposed, because we assume judgment. We'll be rejected rather than embraced, for that matter, transformed.

"Krisis" is the root of our word crisis in the sense of a decisive turning point. God's mercy is seen in the lifting up of the Son, the visible sign of God's grace poured out for the world, creates for us a crisis, a turning point, a decisive moment that we might perceive and receive God's redemptive, life changing love.

Look Up! Get your nose out of the day to day – and look for greater things. The "downward look" – locks us HERE. The "Upward Look" – lifts our vision to greater things.

In the Gospel (3:16) The "Son of Man" is lifted up - and those who "look to him" find wholeness. – "life that is abundant". The Abundant life – our Lenten theme this year. We 'look up' to the One who gives it; supplies it; and blesses us WITH it. Thing is - we look to that, which seems to be a paradox; something so very strange, if not an outright scandal. A serpent which brings death. A Cross, which brings death. But our faith says -- "Look to where God directs us." "Look to the place - where GOD IS."

So we "Look Up" -- to the ONE, who brings wholeness, oneness and unity. Look around - we see division, Party politics. Look around – we see conflict. Globaly: "This Tribe" beating up on "that Tribe". Just look around -- you'll see it all. But LOOK UP to see the One-ness of God! The "One God" who sent his only son into the world, so that whoever, looks to him will not perish but will LIVE. God so loved the world. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up".

This 'paradox' - this 'conundrum' – is the heart of John's Gospel. The highpoint, the moment above all moments in Jesus life is the Cross. (Chapter 12. "*And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself.*") It is the oddest thing, in the eyes of the world, to look to the cross. But that's the "real deal". Not fake news, but the truth. So PASSIONATE is Jesus, that he goes to the cross to fulfill his love and forgiveness for all the world. The CROSS is the greatest expression of love - which the world has ever seen.

There is a time to look down.

There is a time to look up.

There is a time to use your smart phones!

There is a time to put them away.

But always, ALWAYS to stand in the promise of the Cross -- God's love for all. To look up and SEE God's Promise to all. Bringing us wholeness, healing, life and salvation, and making us ONE with one another.

Amen.