

NIGHT VISION

The forecast for Today is for rain, yet it will turn colder this week and there is a chance of snow on Wednesday. If you want, you can get a 10 day forecast, but the reliability of that soothsaying is pretty low. But, wouldn't it be great to know, without a doubt, what the weather will be,... this week,... or next week.....or next month?

Most of humanity is fascinated by the prospects of doing what we can't do, knowing what is beyond us, seeing what is invisible and living beyond our years.

A humble curiosity is good, yet a lust for powers and abilities that are not ours to own is a bit risky – we may be tempted to think we are more valuable than we are.

The Bible is pretty clear about the hazards of arrogance– we can not save ourselves, and the illusion of self importance is actually counterproductive to our own survival. In addition, an inflated self worth can make us think that we can out smart greed by stimulating the market,... build “smart bombs”, do surgical war by knowing who the bad guys are and only killing them,and play with radioactivity without consequences.

WE humans are smart,..... but we are NOT God.

Even so, we are fascinated by reaching beyond our reach.

One example is night vision devices.

A number of years ago, my next door neighbour, let me try his night vision binoculars. In those days, they were called “starbright”.

I don't know what they call them now.

It was nearly pitch black out when I put them on. Then, WOW..... It was VERY Impressive..... I could see the basic shapes and contours of everything. I even noticed someone walking way down the street.

Everything did have a green tint to it, and anything that reflected the least bit of light had a green glow. Details were not real clear, but I thought nothing of all the limitations..... because it was so amazing to see at night / to see what normally can't be seen,..... and after a while, the distortions seemed pretty normal. I thought, “boy, I got to get one of these.”

Nevertheless, in reality, what I saw was a far cry from what can be seen in the daylight: so much was missing,... including details and all the colours.

The device does allow limited “night vision”, but a lot is missed, compared to *Light vision*,.... a lot is missed. Remember that point.

From the Numbers 21 passage, we are presented with the Hebrews, yet again, whining to Moses and God.

And, because they don't see the big picture, their complaining makes little sense. They cried out, "Did you take us from Egypt to die in this desert?"

And, then they bellowed a bit of a contradiction, "We don't have any food and water, and besides we detest this miserable food." ???

So, which is it: no food.... Or they are picky eaters?? Or ... they don't see anything except what is in the present and right in front of them.??

Then things for them did turn ugly; they were attacked by poisonous snakes.

Of course, as they often did in those days, they blamed God for sending the bad stuff – the snakes. And, then they begged Moses to ask God to take away the snakes.

This is so typical,we too often tell God how to solve our problems.

Yet, God did not remove the snakes, but instead instructed Moses to make a poisonous snake and put it on a pole, and God said, "whoever is bitten by a snake" (proving that God didn't remove the snakes), "whoever looks at this image of the snake on the pole, though bitten, shall live."

And, it worked. *And, interesting..... the snake on a pole has become a symbol of healing for the medical community.*

AND, what is even more interesting and profound is that facing what was killing them.....actually healed them.

It is a bit like taking venom from a snake to make anti-venom.

Or, in the vernacular, what bites in you in the rear, may be just the thing that saves you..... *if confronted in a different way / in a different light.*

Perhaps this is suggesting that our healing / our salvation comes NOT from avoidance, but rather THROUGH..... what is killing us.

And, maybe that requires..... seeing things clearly!?????

The John passage begins in verse 14 of chapter 3, where Jesus is trying to make things clear for Nicodemus. *Nicodemus is struggling to understand this redemption / salvation stuff.* He feels that his path to a redeemed life is blocked, and that he is doomed.

In verse 14, Jesus prompts Nicodemus to recall the story of the snake on the pole, by saying, "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up."

.... Be lifted up??. To be viewed by those bitten by Jesus?.....

??? Confronting what is killing you will save you, and how does that fit with Jesus? ???

The point *just isn't clear, yet,.... is it?*

Don't feel badly, Nicodemus was having trouble seeing the point, too..... and it was Jesus doing the talking. So, try to be patient.

I'll try to shed some light but, realize.... part of the message demands us to change in order to see it.

Obviously, I'm using a lot of "vision" and "light" imagery, ...for a reason.

Because so did Jesus,... in verses 19-21. In those verses, he talks about how the light reveals things, especially evil, and how that those who come to the light.... can clearly see and understand.

Maybe..... Seeing clearly, in the full light is essential. ????

Maybe the scholar in Nicodemus was limiting his inspection to Jesus as a teacher,and maybe he was searching for a new code, a simple formula or law to free him from his fears/ to save himself, and he was not seeing the whole picture,..... yet. ????

Many of us do the same thing.

We have grown up with our simplified theology. We have gotten used to what we see, and think it is normal. This is somewhat like getting used to Night vision goggles – becoming accustomed to a limited view.

Yet, our blurry reality leaves us snake bitten – full of fear, frustration, anxiety and anguish. Our pieces fit together, as they did for Nicodemus, yet... life just isn't working right; things don't feel right. We're hurting. The old simple theology may not be enough.

For example, why do so many people try to reduce the Gospel message by lifting John 3:16 out of context..... as if one verse says it all?

We need to see / take in the full spectrum. Real life is not that simple. The way of our Salvation can not fit on a bumper sticker, and can't be said in just a few verses.

We need to see the whole picture / the complete story.

Real life is NOT black and white,..... or... keeping with the imagery, Reality is not shades of green.

It is easy to say, "do this" or "say this" to be savedor "accept that Christ died for your sins and you'll be saved."

But, there is more to it than that. Recall Jesus' constant reference to the light / to seeing.

Listen again to verses 16 and 17:

"For God so LOVED..... theWORLD.....that God gave God's only Son (part of God's self), so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but, instead... will live and live and live.

"Indeed, God DID NOT send the Son into the world to condemn the WORLD, but did so in order that the WORLD might be saved through him."

God loves the world.....EVERYONE!

Everyone—no matter what culture or religion they are from! And, keep in mind, Jesus did NOT bring condemnation..... but redemption.....

And,.....this “salvation” all pivots on believing, accepting who Jesus was: this includes his life, his message, his death and resurrection!

AND, Please don't trivialize all this by thinking that “believing” **just means** believing that Jesus death paid for your sins.

That interpretation has a pale green glow to it; so much else is NOT seen in that simplistic, “night vision” view of salvation.

But, before I go on, I need to point out the dangers of limited vision/ of over simplification.

Not seeing the whole picture can cause people to be judgmental, mean, and even selfish and arrogant. A limited view allows people to believe that they have the formula in their pocket and the rest of the world is wrong, are heathens and sinners,.... and even “bad guys”.

An arrogant simplistic view of life tempts us to think that our way is the only way, that we are justified in killing people in order to save them, and..... to say this clearly, “The war in Iraq and Afghanistan are justified on the premise that we are right – better, and they are wrong and less than us.”

That “limited” thinking doesn't focus on the parts of the Gospel message that are about God loving all the world, about how Jesus did healing, justice, and chose **not** the violent way, ... and how we are to bring light to the world**not** the darkness of judgment, condemnation, destruction and war.

Now, back to the snake on the pole,.... which in John, obviously refers to Jesus and the cross.
How does that bring Healing?

What is IN that message that lets us see/ understand our salvation???

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Let's look without the simplified, limiting night vision view that restricts things to sin and punishment.

Jesus was murdered, this we know.

Jesus' death is often called a sacrifice, and in a way it was, but in a grandeur sense, it was much more than that. It was a sacrifice through demonstration.

If a sacrifice, if a death to cover sins, was all that was needed, then why have a resurrection?

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The resurrection is God's way of saying, NO to killing, NO to a limited way of thinking, and YES to the being, essence, life and message of Jesus.

Jesus lives..... and so does the message, the light.

Repeatedly, in the Old Testament, we hear God saying, “I don't want your sacrifices.”

God is saying...."Please don't kill anything for me. It's messy; it's bloody; It's pointless and it's missing the point. You people can't get rid of your guilt by selling it off, and besides, don't devalue grace."

God can forgive without being paid or bribed.

The resurrection, undoes the notion / the need for a sacrifice.

Jesus' resurrection is a strong affirmation for Jesus the person and his message,..... and it boldly declares the way of Christ / God's way.... can't be destroyed. Love is that powerful! It can't be killed.

And, we don't have to kill for it either.

Jesus didn't choose violence to defend himself or his message.

Instead, he trusted in God, period.

Jesus faced all that was against him. Jesus faced the evil in the world without fighting back, and he was murdered. He trusted in God, and he was killed.

YET, God said, "Hold on, that's not the end, but rather a new beginning. Love prevails!

Could it be that salvation comes by facing, only aided by the love God, what kills us?

Could it be that our redemption is facing and illuminating what we fear the most?

Like poisonous snakes in the desert, I believe, our healing comes when we confront what scares us the most..... which is.. **letting go of our need to save ourselves** and fully and completely trust in God's love for us, forALL OF US.

I'll end with a story.

[I like to end with stories, because if the sermon doesn't make any sense, at least you'll have a story to chew on.]

The setting is the wilderness of Northern Ontario, and this is a real story that happened a number of years ago, when I was backpacking there.

One dark night, *and it was very dark in the woods*, I went down a trail, away from the camp site, intending to do what campers do before they settle down in the tent.

I was going along an animal trail – meaning it was pretty uneven, so I had to keep my flashlight focussed just a few feet ahead of my feet. All I could see was where I was about to step.

And, then suddenly I either heard a noise or felt that something was before me. I don't remember, what prompted me to stop.

I do vividly recall, raising my flashlight and illuminating a 6,000 pound black bear, just 5 feet in front of me.

Well, maybe it was 600 pounds, and maybe it was 10 feet in front of me.

Regardless, it was big and it was way too close.

For what seemed to be a very long time, the bear stood his ground in front of me. Snorting and with lowered head, he didn't move.

And, I just stood there, too, shining my light on him.

I was afraid, to turn and run in the dark, and I was afraid to take my light off him. He was a threat.

He looked pretty mean, And, I knew he could destroy me.

If I had a weapon, I may have considered shooting him.

I perceived the situation that threatening.

More time went by, and then it dawned on me: he wasn't moving because I was blinding him. He was like a deer in the headlights.

Moreover, because of my light in his eyes, he couldn't see me.

So, risking everything, **meaning my life**, I said a quick prayer and I turned the flashlight on myself so that he could view me, and hopefully see that I was not threatening him.

I was the one illuminated, and for those painful moments, all I could see was the light; I could not see the bear, but I could hear it running away.

*I believe my salvation depended on **self exposure**.*

I had to face the fear of losing, and overcome my temptation to defend myself, as if I could, and then completely trust God that I would be okay.

I don't know if that is good advice for bear encounters in the night, but it worked for me and the illustration may shed some light on the message Jesus is trying to get across to Nicodemus and to us.

Jesus is the light of the world, as if the flashlight were on Christ.

Jesus is the light so that ALL can see... the caring, loving, gracious nature of God. Jesus is about love. The message that saves is love, Not brute force; The Gospel message is about the opposite of killing.

It is about love. It is about healing love. It is about nurturing love, redeeming love and enduring love,.....AND.... **it is about risking all for love.**

Our salvation begins by seeing and understanding the way and message of Jesus, because it is the way of God.

And our salvation, continues,... by being as Christ – in the illumination, so that others may see.

And, this illumination is not like “night vision” with its impressive, yet very limited view of the world of darkness.

The Gospel Illumination ends the darkness!

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Even so, we must fully realize that as followers of Christ... the light shines on us.
Being fully revealed and vulnerable is part of the salvation process—for ourselves and others.

And, there is a risk to being illuminated. Jesus was crucified, but as we know, his death was NOT the end of the story. ... Salvation is a process / a journey, and it may lead us down a dark valley, we do not know....

Facing snakes / being illuminated demands that we must face and see what we dread the most – Our true selves and what is killing us.

We are very limited; we are helpless and doomed without the love and Grace of God.

What is it that we see? And, what are others seeing in us?