

Sunday, March 14, 2021
Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year B)

Numbers 21.4-9; John 3.14-21

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/726667147949708>

(Sermon begins at about 11:55)

“For God So Loved the World”

“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.” John 3.16. Perhaps one of the best-known Bible verses of all time. So well known that even if you were to ask a non-Christian to recite John 3.16, they probably could. Part of this is likely due to the pervasiveness of the use of this verse, or reference to it, throughout our culture. While obviously part of the canon of scripture for nearly 2,000 years, it was particularly during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s that John 3.16 came to the fore of our collective consciousness, thanks to the rise in evangelicalism in America. This verse almost becoming the motto or the mission statement for American evangelicalism, thanks to Billy Graham, who was particularly active during this time, holding mass rallies or crusades, where he often preached on this verse. The popularity was so pervasive that signs that simply read “John 3:16,” or even the more truncated “3:16” seemed, and still seems, to be everywhere. On T-shirts, on signs and billboards, even graffitied on freeway overpasses. It is so commonplace that references seem to be present at every sporting event, from high school to nationally televised professional games. So, what is it about this one verse, of all the 31,102 verses in the Bible (excluding the Apocrypha), that has captured our collective attention?

Martin Luther called John 3.16 “the gospel in miniature.” A concise summation of the entirety of the Gospel. “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.” Just how does this one verse sum up the entirety of the Gospel? It helps to understand that this statement is Jesus’ answer to someone who came to him seeking to understand what Jesus’ message—what the good news he was preaching—was really about.

What we hear today is the continuation of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee who has come to Jesus under cover of night. Nicodemus is intrigued by what Jesus has been doing and recognizes that he “has come from God.” He wishes to understand more fully who Jesus is and to learn from him. They have a conversation about the meaning of salvation and how that occurs—including Jesus’ famous statement that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (Jn 3.3), or without “being born anew,” as it is sometimes translated. What ensues is a discussion about the meaning of salvation as understood from a Jewish perspective as compared with Jesus’ unique perspective as the Son of Man. As the one who would ultimately bring about salvation through his death and Resurrection.

In today’s Gospel passage, Jesus tries to find a way to explain the meaning of salvation to Nicodemus. To explain what God is doing through Jesus and how Jesus will be the means of salvation for humanity. And to do it all in a cryptic way so that Nicodemus will understand the

basics without revealing too many of the specifics. This is, after all, still very early in Jesus' public ministry. He can't reveal everything just yet. To do this, Jesus references the events recorded in our Old Testament reading: "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" (Jn 3.14-15). Nicodemus, being a rabbi himself and well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, would have understood the imagery Jesus was seeking to convey.

The story referenced, as we heard, is a tense moment during the Hebrews' forty-year exodus. They have been in the wilderness for some time and are tired and cranky. They start complaining to Moses: "Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest the miserable food" (Num 21.5-6). Essentially complaining against God himself, who has saved them from the Egyptians and who has fed them with manna from heaven—the bread of the angels. And apparently this is not good enough for them. As I said, they were tired and cranky. It's surprising they didn't start whining "are we there yet?" In his frustration, God sends serpents to plague the Hebrews. While this may seem cruel, the serpents are meant to send a message to the people about what they are doing. What they are doing in complaining and questioning God is poisonous and destructive, just as the snakes are. They get the message. "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord" (Num 21.7). At God's command, "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" (Num 21.9). That the bronze serpent would serve as a sign of God's healing of the people. A reminder of their own sinfulness, and that through God alone they were forgiven and healed.

In a cryptic way, Jesus was telling Nicodemus that just as the Hebrews who had sinned were saved by looking upon the bronze serpent lifted on a pole, so too would anyone who has sinned be saved by the Son of Man who would similarly be lifted up. Only this time, not on a pole, but on a cross. That the Son of Man, so lifted up, would not only be a sign, but would be the source of healing. A reminder of their sinfulness, and that through the sacrifice of the Son of Man, they are forgiven and healed.

The imagery used is one of voluntary assent. That the Hebrews had a choice. They could look upon the bronze serpent, remember their own sinfulness and their need for repentance, for forgiveness and healing. That action being a means of asking for and accepting what God offered. A gift that is available to all. All that is required is to look. So, too, with the image of the Son of Man lifted up. That in looking to him, we recognize our own sinfulness and our need for repentance, for forgiveness and healing. An action by which we ask for and accept the salvation that is freely offered to any who choose to seek and believe in what the Son of Man—what God through Jesus—offers.

"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." A statement demonstrating the abundance of God's love for his people. A statement implicitly acknowledging the sinfulness of God's people and the abundant mercy God has for them nonetheless. That God was willing to allow his only Son, Jesus, to be lifted up as a perpetual sign—to be lifted up as the source—of forgiveness and healing. At its highest level, this statement is all about God's love and inclusivity. That all who choose; that all who are humble enough to recognize their own sinfulness; that all who are

willing to turn to the source of healing, will receive the forgiveness and healing they seek. And not just that. Salvation that also comes with the added bonus of eternal life.

But the danger is that it can—and it has, in our own time—been viewed as a statement of exclusivity. Particularly the part about “so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Implying that if one does not believe in Jesus, they are doomed. Which is not at all what Jesus was talking about. Especially if you place it in the context of today’s Gospel passage. What follows verse 16 is “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” (Jn 3.17). This and what follows, despite the juxtaposition of good and evil, of light and darkness, of potential condemnation, does not say that if we do not believe in Jesus we will be sent to hell. There is no talk of judgment, per se. If anything, the rest of the discussion implies the place of human choice, of free will, in the ongoing saga of our sinfulness and our desire for forgiveness and healing, our desire for salvation. We can look to him who was lifted up on the cross, or we can look the other way. We know what happens when we look to the one who is lifted up. Jesus is clear on that. In doing so, we are saved. We are given the hope and the promise of eternal life with him. In this passage, Jesus is silent on what happens if we don’t accept his offer. Although there is certainly the implication that those who don’t accept his offer have not been condemned to be separated from God. They are, rather, separated from God out of their own choosing. A choosing that can be reversed at any time.

The important thing is that John 3.16 is not only a statement. It is also an offer. “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.” God loves us so much that he sent his Son in the flesh to be with us. God loves us so much, despite our sinfulness and brokenness, that he was willing to do whatever was necessary to provide for our forgiveness, for our healing, for our salvation. God loves us so much that he wants us to be with him for eternity. God loves us so much that he was willing to allow his Son, his only Son, to go to the cross to make that happen. And God loves us so much that he is not going to make us do anything we don’t want to do. God gave us free will in all things. Even about our salvation. Even in that, he gives us a choice. We can look to his Son lifted up—lifted up on a cross—and chose to believe that here is the salvation of the world. That here is my salvation. Here is your salvation. Or we can choose to look the other way.

What is contained in John 3.16 is a statement of God’s love for us. A statement of Christ’s love for us. It is a statement of God’s inclusivity—that all are welcomed. And as if that is not enough, it is also an offer. An offer of unconditional forgiveness. An offer of ultimate healing. An offer of new and eternal life. An offer that is made to each and every one of us, no matter who we are. No matter what we might have done. An offer made without judgment. An offer made without condemnation. An offer made purely out of love.

John 3.16 is certainly the gospel in miniature. But it is even more than that. It is a creedal statement summing up our life of faith. Summing up the hope and promise of something beyond our wildest imaginings. Summing up the hope and promise of what awaits us at the end of our Lenten journey.