

**Sunday, March 10, 2024**  
**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/1199054331259936>

*(Sermon begins at about 21:50)*

**“God Loved the World in This Way”**

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that every one who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Undeniably one of the most well-known passages from all of scripture, at least in our own age. The mere mention of its citation—John 3.16—calling to mind the entirety of the passage for Christians and non-Christians alike. The passage that Martin Luther called “the gospel in miniature”—a summary of the entirety of the gospel in one verse. And yet, we actually got it wrong.

Now, I certainly don’t mean to imply that this passage is incorrect. God did indeed love the world. God did indeed give his only Son as a means of salvation. God did indeed give his only Son so that we might have eternal life. All that is most certainly true. It’s just not the entire truth. So, this passage is not so much wrong as it is incomplete. Partly because it is taken out of context—which I will get to in due course. And partly because many, upon hearing this verse, focus on and emphasize one part of the verse: the last phrase, which reads, “so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” For many, this has become a statement of exclusivity as opposed to inclusivity. In the mouths of many, this verse becomes more of a warning than an invitation. If you do not believe as I do, you will not be saved, you will not attain eternal life.

As we will see when we take a deeper dive into the context of Jesus’ statement, all this will be redeemed.

The reason our understanding of John 3.16 is incomplete has to do with a translation issue. Or more accurately, that we are overlaying a contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century interpretation of one word, oblivious to the original 17<sup>th</sup> century meaning. The offending word is such a simple one: the word “so” in “For God so loved the world.” We naturally have a tendency of using the word “so” to mean “very” or “to a great extent.” As in “I’m so happy to see you.” But the word Jesus used, that we translate as “so” did not mean “very” or “to a great extent.” The Greek word in John’s Gospel, the one translated as “so” actually means “in this way.” When the first authorized English translation of the Bible—the King James Version— was written in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the editors translated the Greek word for “in this way” as “so,” which was the common meaning for “so” at that time. Suffice it to say, because we have continued to use the 17<sup>th</sup> century word but applied a revised contemporary meaning, we have skewed the intension of Jesus’ original statement.

What this means is that we interpret John 3.16 to be a statement about the extent of God’s love. Thinking it to mean “God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son.” Not that this

is an incorrect statement. We know and believe that God loves the world, that God loves us, so much that he gave his Son for our salvation. But even though very true, it nonetheless is not complete. At least not as Jesus' intended. His intent was not to convey how much God loves us, but rather how God shows his love for us. Which was meant to convey not only the means, but also by implication, the extent.

This is largely because we take John 3.16 in isolation. This one verse, while significant, is part of a larger passage. Specifically, it is sandwiched between John 3.14 and 15, and John 3.17, all of which provide context and deeper meaning for Jesus' statement. And even more so, the entire Gospel passage we heard today is a part of a larger story in which Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to Jesus under cover of night, to engage in some pretty heavy-duty theological discussion. Implying that Nicodemus, while part of Jewish leadership, may have been a secret follower of Jesus.

After the famous discussion in which Jesus tells Nicodemus that "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (Jn 3.3), Jesus seeks to further educate Nicodemus about the meaning of God's love and eternal life as an expression of that love. Which is where the Gospel picks up today. Jesus starts by saying "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." And then immediately follows with the "For God so loved the world" statement. Which, as noted, really was "God loved the world in this way." Emphasizing the imagery of Moses lifting up the snake in the wilderness as an image for how God loves the world, as an image of what it means for the Son of Man, God's Son, to also be lifted up.

Nicodemus was a scholar of the Jewish Bible. He knew the stories and the deeper meanings behind them. Nicodemus would have immediately understood what Jesus was saying about God's love. Both the extent, but even more so, the means by which God's love will be revealed.

In our Old Testament reading for today, we heard the story of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. The same image Jesus used in his discourse with Nicodemus. And there is so much more behind this imagery than meets the eye. As we heard, the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, heading for the Promised Land. Throughout their time in the wilderness, there are a number of times—over a dozen—when the people complain and even rebel against God. The scriptural equivalent of "are we there yet?" What we hear today is the last of these rebellions. The people are complaining that they have no food and no water. Despite God giving them manna from heaven, the bread of angels. Despite God providing water for them. God has had it with the people complaining. God has had it with the people questioning his authority. God has had it with the people being ungrateful for all he has done to protect them and keep them alive in the midst of a very long and difficult journey. So God sends poisonous serpents among the people to wreak havoc.

It is important to note that, despite what the people are thinking, God did not send the poisonous serpents as a form of divine punishment. Rather, the serpents were meant to send a message, to teach the people a lesson. That their complaints are, like the serpents, poisonous and bitter. Their complaints are even "serpentine" in nature, being contradictory. If anything, they are complaining for the sake of complaining. In short, the poisonous serpents are meant to

be a symbol of the people's self-destructive sinfulness and how that sinfulness, directed at God, has become an impediment to relationship with God.

The people get the message. They see that they have been sinful. That their sinfulness has ultimately been self-destructive and counter to their own well-being. That they have attempted to go against God rather than to have faith and trust in God's love. They cry out "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD." Upon acknowledging their sinfulness, they beg for forgiveness, for relief. To symbolize the act of forgiveness, to symbolize the act of healing and redemption, God commands Moses to "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten"—that everyone who is sinful—"shall look at it and live." And the people are forgiven. The people are healed. The people are redeemed.

In the exchange with Nicodemus, Jesus invokes this anecdote from their shared history as an image to explain how God loves the entire world—a world that is sinful and corrupt, a world that has rebelled against God. Although this time, a serpent lifted up in the wilderness is not going to do the trick. Rather, just as Moses lifted up the serpent as a sign of forgiveness and healing for all the people, it will be necessary for the Son of Man, for the Son of God, to be lifted up as a sign of forgiveness and healing. The word Jesus used for being "lifted up" carries the double meaning of being physically lifted up and of being exalted. A little bit of wordplay on Jesus' part to imply that in being lifted up on a cross, he will be exalted. Not only being a foreshadowing of his death, but being lifted up and being exalted alluding to Jesus resurrection and ascension, as well.

The image of the serpents in the wilderness is a vivid symbol of the self-destructive nature of sin, and God's love and mercy in graciously transforming the worst within us to provide redemption. The cross plays this same role: reminding us of the self-destructive nature of our sinfulness. Sinfulness characterized by the same violence and betrayal with which Jesus was lifted up on the cross. And at the same time, the evil of that cross being transformed into an instrument of forgiveness and redemption. With Jesus' comment of "For God so loved the world"—of "God loved the world in this way"—not just conveying the extent of God's love, but also the means by which God shows that love. Namely, the forgiveness of our sins and the healing of impaired relationship with him.

Which leaves just one hanging question: who is this forgiveness and redemption meant for? This has been an ongoing debate, particularly in light of our central passage today: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that every one who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." If we reframe the wording to "God loved the world in this way," in the way that God provided for the forgiveness and redemption of the Israelites in the wilderness, that changes the answer. God was explicit in his instructions to Moses. The means of forgiveness and healing he provided did not come with any restrictions, with any caveats. Everyone who looked on the serpent would live. Not just a chosen few, not just those who believed a particular way. God's forgiveness and healing was meant to save all who are sinful.

In saying that God loved the world in this way—in the same way he had loved the Israelites—Jesus is opening the way for all to receive God's forgiveness and healing. Which he further emphasizes in John 3.17: "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.” Again, not to save just a chosen few, to save those who believe a particular way. Rather, the Son came to save all who are sinful. That he came to save all of us.

Our Lenten journey, by design, has many parallels with the wilderness experience of the Israelites. A time of intentionally looking at who we are and at our relationship with God. Recognizing our sinfulness is poisonous to that relationship. Recognizing that we are in need to God’s love and mercy, of God’s forgiveness and healing. Recalling that just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness as a sign of and a means to forgiveness and healing, so too was Jesus lifted up on a cross as the sign of and means to our own forgiveness and healing. A reality that we move closer to as we continue our Lenten journey. The reality that will be revealed in just a couple of weeks, as we stand at the foot of the cross, as we approach the empty tomb. For God loved the world in this way.