

Fourth Sunday of Lent – 03 11 18

Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Grace to you and peace...

Say it with me – the most well-known, iconic Bible verse: “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.”

HOW did this word of grace and promise come to be synonymous with beating people up with religious exclusivism?

The problem, I think, comes with knowing the text without knowing the context. That is, the words have so often been emblazoned on billboards and posters, at ballgames and civic events, that they have been separated from the salvific grace they carried when first they came from the lips of Jesus.

Beyond the simple separation of this text from its context, whenever the words or just the citation: John 3:16 appears, we are left to intuit or make a judgment about the intention of the proclamation. Does the fervent believer at a football game elevate these words out of a deep desire that everyone experience the incomprehensible love of God? Or is it intended to shame those who have not “accepted Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior?” Is it a promise? Or a threat? Words taken out of context are always vulnerable to misunderstanding or misinterpretation.

So then, let’s put this profound and controversial verse back INTO its context. Try to go with me...

Our gospel reading begins with Jesus saying, “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...” which just happens to refer to the very story we heard as our first reading. It’s rare that we get such an explicit connection between the first reading, from Hebrew scripture, and our Gospel reading as we have today. It’s fair to expect that relatively few 21st century Christians are very familiar with the story of Moses and the bronze serpent, but Jesus makes the reference during his conversation with Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a leader and a teacher of the Jews. *He* would have been very familiar with Jesus’ reference. Even if he didn’t quite understand what Jesus was trying to say.

Nicodemus is something of an ambiguous character. Part of the Jewish leadership, he comes by himself, under cover of night, to see Jesus and ask him a few questions. He is curious about Jesus, but doesn’t want his curiosity and his interaction to be known among his peers. It’s hard to tell if Nicodemus is genuinely interested or if he is hoping to trap Jesus in some way. All we know from the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus is that 1) Jesus has the upper hand; 2) Nicodemus is at the very least confused by what Jesus tells him; and 3) we don’t hear of Nic again until he assists Joseph of Arimathea in caring for Jesus’ crucified body.

But there is some comparison, Jesus claims, between the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness by Moses and the necessary “lifting up” of the Son of Man.

More context.

Remember that God heard the cries of the Israelites in bondage under Pharaoh in Egypt and responded by raising up Moses to lead them to freedom. It took a whole series of negotiations and plagues for Pharaoh to finally give in to God's command to "let my people go." Saved from the final plague, the angel of death, by the blood of the lamb painted on their doorposts and lintels, the Israelites escaped to the wilderness, with only God's promise that they were going to a land prepared for them. The wilderness journey took forty years and included saga after saga of the Israelites complaining about the difficulties of freedom and God's ongoing provision: of the law at Mount Horeb, manna and quail to feed their hunger, water from the rock to quench their thirst. Over and over, the Israelites complain, Moses intercedes with God, and God responds with grace. Until this particular episode.

Sounding rather like crabby children who say, "I'm starving and there's never anything to eat in this house...no – I don't want THAT!" the people apparently have tried God's patience. The people grumble, "Why have you brought us into the wilderness to die?" and poisonous serpents suddenly appear. The wilderness is, after all, a dangerous place. And liberty has its challenges. Attributing the dangerous snakes to God as punishment for their sin of mistrust, they beg Moses to ask God to take the serpents away. Does this sound at all familiar?

I don't trust you, God, because I don't like what's happening to me...Oh no! I really need your help right now!

God's answer to their prayer is not to take the serpents away. Instead God instructs Moses to make a serpent and set it on a pole. Anyone who is bitten by a poisonous snake has only to look at the serpent lifted up on the pole, and they will live.

God does not take away the consequence of the people's sin. Rather, the people must look directly at the consequence of their sin...and they will live. This is how salvation will come to God's people. The only way they could live was to trust the promise of God to save them.

Now let's return to that most famous of verses.

We tend to hear the verse saying, "God loved the world *so much* that God gave the only Son," but in fact a better translation would read, "God loved the world *in this way*." That is, the way God chose to reveal God's heart of love to the world was by sending the Son into this world. Remember. This is John's Gospel. God's only Son, according to John, is the Word of God that was with God from the beginning. The only Son is *life* – the life that is the *light* that shines in the darkness and is not overcome. Jesus, the one in whom we are to "believe" is the Word that "became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth."

God's only Son is, simply put, the Source of life and light – the life that begins now and continues into eternity. God in the flesh. God with skin on. That without which nothing exists.

For God so love the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Is this promise? Or threat?

More context.

Why is it that we so rarely hear the verse that comes next? John 3:17 adds, “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.” God’s desire and intention is that all creation would trust in the One who is the very source of life itself.

Jesus’ voice goes on. “This is the verdict: light has come into the world; and people loved darkness rather than light.” People would rather pursue their own deeds; rely on their own strength and their own understanding; rather than trusting the Creator of life and light.

Does that ring true to you? How often have you heard anything on the order of “I don’t like to ask for help,” or “I’m an independent person; I can make it on my own,” or even “I’ve never asked God for forgiveness; I don’t bring God into that.” The human insistence on individualism, independence, and by extension, competition, is our determination to reject the very presence of God.

The definition of sin is, quite simply, to turn away from God. And there are an abundance of consequences for turning our backs on the Source of our existence. Environmental destruction for one. Endless war and violence is another. Heartless condemnation of ourselves or others. Using other humans for our own ends and our own desires. Discrimination. Greed. Hatred. The list goes on and on, and we live with the pain of such sin day in and day out.

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.

Jesus came into the world from God, to reveal the truth about God’s unending and undeserved love. Humanity preferred the

darkness and so put Jesus on the cross rather than put our trust in the ways of God.

The only cure for the consequences of that distrust is to look directly at the suffering we have caused. In order to be saved from poisonous snakes, the people had to look at the very thing they were trying to avoid. In order to be healed from...gun violence, stare at the horror of children being targeted in their schools; the only way to be saved from racial inequities is to stare directly at our privilege as white people and our assumption that "our way" is the only/best way; look at the polluted air and water and see the consequence of rejecting our rightful role as stewards of creation. The only cure for sin is to look directly and unflinchingly at the evil that it unleashes...and receive the grace and mercy of God.

Hear again these words from Ephesians:

You were dead through the trespasses and sins² in which you once lived...

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which God loved us⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ --by grace you have been saved—

THIS is the work of the cross – that God loves all humanity enough to insist that we look honestly at what happens when we reject God's way of love and light and truth, in order that we may be restored to our truer selves.

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

For God loved the world in this way: giving the Word in human form, so that everyone who trusts God may not perish but may have eternal life.

THAT is pure promise. So be it. Amen.