

—The Fourth Sunday of Lent - March 14, 2021 – The Rev. Elizabeth W. Colton

Today's gospel contains a very famous line. You all know it: "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."<sup>1</sup> It is famous enough that it is often shortened to just its citation: "John 3:16." In the 70's and 80's it was frequently seen at large gatherings, particularly sports events. The camera would pan the crowd, and people would hold up signs that said "John 3:16." The popularity of this little piece of scripture in those years may be parallel to the popularity of the evangelical preacher Billy Graham. He was at his height in those years. For Graham, John 3:16 was a cornerstone, even a starting place for many of his sermons. He often told of learning it as a memory verse from his mother as a young child. Perhaps it stands alone perfectly well as a statement of faith. But perhaps it also struggles to be understood without its context. Both/and!

I've been fascinated lately by the news reporting about QAnon. It seems that the people who join QAnon are desperate for connection and community. They find real solace in one another, and in their common goal: to find a meaning hidden in fragments of news media and social media posts. And it is these longings, to find meaning and community that both fascinate and feel extremely poignant to me. They remind me a bit of the Gnostics of the first century, who also looked for secret meanings in the gospels and other scriptures. And I wonder if the members of QAnon don't have the same hunger for connection, meaning, and the sustenance of God's love as those early Gnostics did. It pains me to think that we church-belonging Christians have so much to offer them, yet it is not received. We know and live the richness of community, and a common belief which impels us into a rewarding life of service. Yet maybe this does not meet their needs; or perhaps our message is not presented in a context that catches their attention.

If we have learned anything, it is that we need to look at context. One line, taken from anywhere, gospel or social media post, has only a limited ability to stand on its own and bear the burden of truth. And so although our selection from the Gospel of John this morning doesn't give us the context in which Jesus is speaking, it is important for us to know the story from which it springs, that we might understand more broadly. In other words, take the 10,000 foot view of the whole story, and then move in for a closer view.

Simply put, Jesus is responding to a question. The question comes from Nicodemus, identified as "a leader of the Jews."<sup>2</sup> Nicodemus, you will remember, sneaks off to see Jesus in the middle of the night. His colleagues, united in their concern for the *Pax Romana* and the delicate tension between Romans and Jews, would never have approved of him going to see the rabble-rouser Jesus. Not to mention observing, quite overtly, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." And even calling him "Rabbi," oh my! They would never have approved of one of their own making contact, or acknowledging anything special about Jesus, so the dark of night is cover for the curious Nicodemus.

They have conversation about entering the kingdom of God by being born from above. And in the course of the conversation the pronoun "you" becomes plural, so we might assume that Jesus' disciples are listening as well. After a puzzling exchange about understanding earthly and heavenly things, about being born of the spirit, Jesus resorts to something Nicodemus will understand. He reminds him of an old, old story about the people of Israel, wandering in the wilderness, all the while complaining repeatedly to Moses. Mostly they complain about the conditions, and the food, but as

---

<sup>1</sup> John 3:16

<sup>2</sup> John 3:1

their frustration peaks, they also complain about God. And that is too much. To speak against Moses is one thing, to speak against God is another thing altogether. So God punishes the people and sends poisonous snakes to bite the people, and the people die. This is the punishment for their sin, and hubris, of speaking against God. When their family members begin to die of fatal snakebites, the people recognize their sin, and ask Moses to intercede for them. In a time honored pattern, following confession and repentance, God forgives. Moses is instructed to fashion a serpent on a staff and erect it high so that people can see it. And when they look upon it, the bite of the serpent will not prove fatal.

Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, would have known this story well. He would have known that the serpent symbolized God's readiness to alleviate human suffering. Previous to the serpent story, there had been countless examples: the exodus of the Israelites from enslavement, the provision of water from a rock, the miraculous appearance of manna, and even quails for the meat-deprived and cranky Israelites. But manna, water and meat, as important as they were to the survival of those wandering people, did not have the symbolism of the bronze serpent, hoisted high for all to see. The message of that bronze serpent is that it no longer possesses the sting of death. Looking up at it and believing in God's power would save the frightened Israelites from dying of snakebite.

It is a natural step, then, for Jesus to suggest that a similar thing will happen to the Son of Man. The Son of Man, Jesus says, did not come to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. All of it. Everyone. Without exception. Now, all of us, with the gift of hindsight, unlike the puzzled Nicodemus, can see the parallel between the Son of Man hoisted upon a cross and a bronze serpent impaled upon a stake. The bronze snake has no power. It is a reminder of God's power to save, God's willingness to save, God's desire to save everyone who believes. The dead Christ has no power either, but that is nowhere near the end of that story.

Perhaps the incident with the people of Israel is ultimately about trust in God. They had been murmuring for some time, complaining about the conditions in the wilderness, and their inability to find familiar water and food sources. When they finally erupt and speak against God as well as Moses, it is fundamentally a lack of trust. And once again, we see the parallel. The people who have been listening to Jesus can't quite bring themselves to trust what he is saying. And what is he saying?

In typical Gospel of John style, the meaning is not straightforward and concise. So, it is now time to descend from the 10,000 foot view of the entire context down to a close-up view. And what do we find? John 3:16! We have the gift of hindsight, because we know where this story is going. For Nicodemus, it is not at all straightforward, at this point, what "God giving his son" is going to mean, but the serpent on the staff is an important signpost. Something about death and its power over believers. It is equally not straightforward, at this point, what "eternal life" might mean. These mysteries will soon become clearer as the terrible and glorious story unfolds as we travel this way of the cross, which is the way of love. Like Nicodemus, we will come to understand John 3:16 so vividly that it can stand alone. "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."