

## ***The Cross: Why Lent Leads Us Here***

***John 3:14-21***

***March 14, 2021***

Nicodemus, a leading Pharisee, came to Jesus by night, secret, cautious, hidden. He came with questions: *I know you must be from God because of these extraordinary signs of healing and teaching we have witnessed.* Instead of reassuring Nicodemus with a direct response, neither agreeing or disagreeing with his interpretation of him, Jesus goes on to propose that the way into the kingdom is through the work of the Spirit in conversion. One needed to be born from above in order to be in the kingdom. The old pathway of the law, circumcision and tribe identity, what Jesus calls, **the flesh**, has ended. Nicodemus is flabbergasted!

Jesus seems to be still engaging Nicodemus up to verse twelve where Jesus says to him: ***If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?*** From this point we pick up our reading today, which may be a continuation of this discussion, or simply John's commentary on Jesus' kingdom teaching. But make no mistake, our reading today, whether directly to Nicodemus or John's commentary, is a powerful statement on God's love for the world. Certainly, one of the most well-known and popular bible verses is found in this passage from verses 14 on: **For in this way God loved the world, that [God] gave the only generated son, in order that anyone who believes in him would not [be] destroyed but have life eternal (a literal translation of the Greek)**

If Jesus' teaching on the need to be born from above is necessary to be in the kingdom was puzzling to this leading Pharisee, Jesus' commentary that flows from this would have been even more perplexing. God loves the world! Really! Nicodemus, a Pharisee, who was a leader used to privilege and entitlement, would have

found this message of God's love for the world unnerving. If we read on in the following chapter, we see that the disciples also needed to understand this message. We are told that Jesus meets a woman at the well. She *is* the world they have never touched or considered to be included in God's loving embrace—a woman and a non-Jew. But Jesus reaches out to her!

In our Lenten journey we have arrived at the profound heart of the matter—the lens through which we must view our Lenten journey. The path takes us through the cross where God's love is expressed through a Son given for the world. Through our prayers and reflection and disciplined walk with God, we follow the path of our Lord toward Black Friday when the sun ceased to shine and Jesus died a cruel death. This is the road we choose as Christians. It is certainly a violent, demeaning end to this teacher from Nazareth. But it was no accident that he ended up on that hill outside Jerusalem. John reminds us that Messiah's death was preordained and flows out of God's love for the entire world. It was God's plan from before the beginning of the story in the Garden. ***For in this way God loved the world.*** The words roll off our tongues because they are so familiar. But these words take us to the heart of the meaning of the cross, God's passionate love for the human family.

Sarah Henrich, in her reflections on this passage reminds us of Rembrandt's amazing ability with light and darkness. He was the master of this technique. It is called ***chiaroscuro*** and refers to the juxtaposition of light and shade as a visual effect in art. It lends a dramatic intensity and psychological depth to Rembrandt's paintings. John, it seems to me, was also a master of this technique. Light and darkness are prominent themes throughout his Gospel and are woven into a beautiful tapestry of God's love for the world.

She also wishes Rembrandt had painted the scene between Nicodemus and Jesus. He would have had a heyday with the light and darkness in that scene! Maybe Nicodemus came to Jesus by night because he was nervous that his Jewish brothers would accuse him of being a follower. Everything about this clandestine meeting speaks of light and darkness. John says: **And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. (John 3:19ff)**

To understand our favourite John 3:16 text we need to pay attention to the words preceding it. Jesus tells Nicodemus that, 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.**

Our passage begins with a play on the word *lift up*. It describes God's command to Moses to lift up the serpent in the wilderness and the lifting up that is in store for Jesus. The passage makes little sense without the background story from Numbers 21:4-9 which we read this morning. In that narrative, the people became "impatient" on their way through the wilderness. They were getting increasingly impatient with Moses because they were short of water and their diet of Manna had become detestable. In response God sent them a plague of snakes which killed many of them. (In parenthesis let me say that it was only the Israelites who believed God had sent the snakes as punishment for their complaining, but the text doesn't say this. Cameron Howard in his reflection on this text notes that the narrative specifies that God sends the snakes, but never does either God or the narrator call the snakes a punishment; the people themselves draw that conclusion)

In response they humbled themselves before Moses and asked for forgiveness for speaking against God and him. Moses prayed for them and God gave this answer: **Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So 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.**

They had to look at their sin, their complaint against God for their lack of food and water, and their diet of Manna, and be healed from the serpent’s bite. The serpent was a mark of God’s anger and God’s mercy. God’s people might be saved by the God of life, if only they would look upon the image of that which would have brought about their death. We, on the other hand, are to look to the one hanging on the pole, the crucified Jesus, and believe that he has the power to grant us eternal life. Not merely to be healed from snakes’ venom, but from being shut out of eternal life.

The Hebrews who wandered through the wilderness did not experience God as a safe and comfortable companion. We remember that in the great showdown with Pharaoh, God sends ten vicious plagues to show the superiority of Israel’s God over Egypt’s gods, including Pharaoh, who made his own claims to divinity. On the way out of Egypt, God appears as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, a sight that incites panic in the Egyptians. At Sinai, God thunders on the mountain in fire and smoke, terrifying the Israelites. These are not the images of God that call us to snuggle up in God’s everlasting arms, “safe and secure from all alarms,” as the old hymn goes. Is it not in Hebrews we read: **It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God? (Hebrews 10:31)**

As 21<sup>st</sup>-century Christians we probably find this sort of argument takes us out of our comfort zone to imagine God as a dangerous,

unpredictable presence in our lives. Yet, if we claim that we've got God all figured out, then we may be on equally dangerous grounds. God's freedom and mystery is replete in Scripture. Is this not Paul's conclusion in Romans: **O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? (Romans 11:33ff)** Our temptation seems to be that we always want to domesticate God.

We ought to notice before passing on from this Old Testament story that hundreds of years later, during the religious revival under Hezekiah, this pole story is brought up again in 2 Kings 18:4. We are told there that the king: **removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan.**

This is the derogatory name given to the bronze serpent on the pole which had become a sort of snake cult. The Israelites had forgotten the living, free, dangerous God who commanded the construction of the serpent in the wilderness, and they focused instead on a bronzed, domesticated, manufactured idol that they could see and understand. This, it would seem, is our natural human inclination when it comes to idols and worship. We find it safer to make our own idols than chance our future with the promises of the hidden God who says that God loves the world, not matter what.

We ought not do this with the cross. Why? Because it represents God's heart for the world, and a portal that takes us into the inner recesses of God's love. It is the place where our Lenten pilgrimage takes us, this place of the scull. There we bow in wonder, love and praise. *Amen*

