

FIRST LESSON: Numbers 21:4-9
SECOND LESSON: John 3:14-21
March 14, 2021
FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

“Looking for Salvation”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

The conversation recorded in John’s gospel we read this morning is between Jesus and Nicodemus. It is part of the very famous, “born again” interaction. Jesus told Nicodemus, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” And Nicodemus had responded, “How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” Jesus answered Nicodemus, and part of his explanation involved the use of a very strange episode from the Old Testament. It’s a story that we would probably find a way to ignore if Jesus had not highlighted it here—the story of the bronze snake on a pole. This same bronze snake was later destroyed by Hezekiah because the people had started to worship it. (2 Kings 18:4)

The people of Israel were traveling in the wilderness. They had taken a detour around Edom. But of course, they grew impatient. “Are we there yet?” is not a new thing. The going was tough. They seemed to be just wandering in circles. They demanded Moses give an account. “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” they said. “There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” I guess manna from heaven gets old after awhile. And then things got worse. We are told “the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.” If you are like me you may have a problem with their interpretation of events. But regardless of cause and effect, they believed it was punishment for their rebellion. So Moses prayed and God told him what to do. “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” This seems an odd thing to do. But when the people looked at the snake they were acknowledging that they had done wrong, and in the process they got right with God. And they were healed as a result.

We would have forgotten this story if Jesus had not used it as a metaphor for his own death on the cross. The words “lifted up” here have a painful double meaning. Jesus was literally, physically lifted up on the cross to die a painful death in the sight of all. But he was also gloriously, mercifully lifted up to life again in the resurrection. When we gaze upon Christ lifted up for us in these two ways, we recognize where we have gone wrong, acknowledge our sin, and are restored to God.

Those who looked upon the bronze snake were healed and lived. But those who look upon Jesus with faith are healed and given eternal life. One of the most memorized verses in scripture comes next, John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him

shall not perish but have eternal life.” Eternal life is not just life that doesn’t end. That could be a nightmare. It is life that doesn’t end spent in the presence of God, a life of perfect peace and joy.

The promise of John 3:16 looks back to the Covenant of Noah where we began a few weeks ago. God loves THE WORLD, the entire *kosmos*. Over time the idea of exactly who God loves had narrowed. Many Jews at the time of Jesus believed that God only loved the Jewish nation. A nationalism infused with a sense of divine right and privilege is a dangerous thing. We have seen this in Muslim countries. We have seen this in the United States. And it is clearly evident in white supremacist neo-Nazi groups today. *God loves me, but not you. I am superior. You are inferior.* I was watching a clip on TV the other week of a brief encounter between a young woman carrying a Black Lives Matter sign and a white supremacist. He told her, “Black lives don’t matter. **ONLY** white lives matter.” But God does not share his opinion. And the Old Testament gives witness to God’s ongoing love for the nations. Jonah was sent to Nineveh, now modern-day Iraq, to non-Jews. In John’s gospel we hear this clear and universal proclamation—God loves the WORLD.

But then comes the part we are less comfortable with. Verses 17 and 18 continue: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”

The word that the NIV has translated “condemn” is *krino*. There may be a subtle form of translation bias going on here, because *krino* does not really mean “to condemn.” It means to judge between one thing and another. It is to distinguish good from bad. Condemnation is not necessarily part of the deal. It’s judgment we’re talking about, and judgment can go either way. If we read, “For God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not judged, but whoever does not believe stands judged already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son,” it sounds a little bit different.

To believe is not merely an intellectual exercise. This word means “to have faith in.” And what we are to have faith in, according to verse 18, is the name of God’s one and only Son. In other places we are told to have faith in Jesus. Here we are to have faith in the name of Jesus. Contemporary Americans don’t have the same understanding of the power of a person’s name that they did. A name is a revelation of character. A name is a nature. A name can fully represent someone. When I authorize another person to act in my name they can “be me” legally to do something. But what does it mean to have faith in the name of Jesus? We can do things in the name of Jesus, like healing or preaching. But believing in his name is subtly different. It means believing in his nature. The nature of Jesus is divine. And the nature of Jesus is light and goodness, mercy and justice. Some have even argued that non-Christians can believe in “the name” of Jesus in this way by believing in truth and goodness. I’m not sure we can stretch it that far. But the scripture does say, “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and

will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.”

Having faith in Jesus, being “saved” or “born again” might not be as simplistic as the pamphlets handed out on college campuses would lead us to believe. Anyone can SAY, “I accept Jesus as my personal savior,” and not LIVE that faith. What God wants is for us to walk in the light. But some people choose darkness because their deeds are evil. Jesus says in Matthew 7:21, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

We’re all looking for cheap grace in our world. We’ve been convinced that repeating a formula or accepting an intellectual proposition constitutes salvation. But believing in God and believing in God’s son Jesus involves the Holy Spirit. It means being renewed from the inside out. Something changes. We could call it being “born again” or “born from above”. It’s unfortunate that that expression has been hijacked by a narrow community within Christianity. But a dramatic conversion story is not necessary. The change can be slow or sudden, but it’s real. The Spirit draws us towards the light. We find ourselves striving to do God’s will, to be kind and just and to help others. We CAN blow it. We can mess up and do wrong. But we won’t be comfortable doing wrong. Adding the Holy Spirit to our conscience is like putting it on steroids. In Alcoholics Anonymous there is a saying that going to AA spoils your drinking. Once you know the truth going back out is never the same. In the same way the Holy Spirit spoils our self-centered narcissism. Once the Spirit has opened our eyes, there’s no going back to not seeing how empty many of the promises of this world really are. If we believe in Jesus, if we believe in the name of Jesus, the trajectory of our lives will always be God-focused, because once the Holy Spirit moves in there is no force in the world that will evict it. Amen.

Numbers 21:4-9

⁴ They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵ they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”

⁶ Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷ The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸ The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.”⁹ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

John 3:14-21

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.