

Sermon 3-14-21

John 3:14-21 The holy gospel according to John

[Jesus said:] 14“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16“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.

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. 18Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

The gospel of the Lord

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In the incident from the book of Numbers to which our gospel refers the people of God are in the wilderness following their exodus from Egypt and because of their grumbling, the Lord sends poisonous serpents to bite the people, and many of them died. The people then go to Moses, saying that they realize that they have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against Moses. They plead for him to pray to the Lord to take the snakes away. The Lord tells Moses to make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who looks at it will live, which Moses does.

In our gospel text Jesus is still in conversation with Nicodemus and replying to his last question, “How can these things be?” Jesus says, “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 is trying to open Nicodemus eyes, to open our eyes, to look to him being lifted up as the way that leads to a deeper and fuller life.

I can relate to Nicodemus' approach in this conversation with Jesus. He wants to have it all figured out. He wants Jesus to explain how God's salvation program works, but instead he's just invited to trust in the paschal mystery. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him...

Ah, there's that word that can cause this most familiar and beloved verse to be so misunderstood. This is especially true if we consider believing to be an intellectual assent to some stated principle or doctrine. [For example, Mark Twain was once asked if he believed in infant baptism. Maybe you know how Twain countered this question about his intellectual assent to the practice. He replied, "Believe in it, why I've even seen it done."] I don't think that Jesus is inviting us here to assent to an understanding about how God's salvation program works, but rather simply to trust that it does. Today, we're invited to look upon the one who has been lifted up and trust that there is something very life giving for us here. What if every time the word 'believe' appears in this text we substitute the word trust? For example: Those who **trust** in him are not condemned; but those who do not **trust** are condemned already, because they have not **trusted** in the name of the only Son of God.

When it comes to faith, our believing is more than an intellectual assent. It's a diving in and trusting in the unknown. There's a reason we call Jesus passion and resurrection, the paschal mystery. As Debbie Thomas wrote in her *Journey with Jesus* blog this week: In the cross, we are forced to see what our refusal to love, our indifference to suffering, our craving for violence, our resistance to change, our hatred of difference, our addiction to judgment, and our fear of the Other must wreak. When the Son of Man is lifted up, we see with chilling and desperate clarity our need for a God who will take our most horrific instruments of death, and transform them, at great cost, for the purposes of resurrection...The cross of Christ is a great mystery — and that is as it should be. Among many other things, it is a stunning

paradox of sorrow and hope, judgment and mercy, despair and healing, brokenness and hope. It's okay not to understand — the invitation is to see. So look up. Don't be afraid. Don't refuse the pain. Don't turn away. Look up and be saved.

As we look to the one who was lifted up, we see him lifted up on the cross, lifted up from the grave, and lifted up in his ascension to participate in the divine mystery of the Trinity. As we look we're saved, and our passage from Ephesians reminds us that this is not of our own doing. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, (or through trust), and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

Once we've experienced what Ephesians calls this immeasurable richness of God's grace. Once we too have died and risen, Christ's ways of sacrificial love become our ways.

Alan Barnhart is a businessman who runs a business that generated revenue of 375 million dollars in 2018. When he and his brother took over their small family business in Tennessee, Barnhart Crane and Rigging, they set incomes for themselves that would enable them to support their families in a modest middle class lifestyle and agreed that anything the company made beyond that would be given to ministry, particularly ministries in the developing world.

In their first year they were able to give away \$50,000; in the second year \$150,000; and now they give away more than \$1 million a month. They have also placed 99% ownership of the company into a trust that will ensure that when they have departed, all proceeds from the firm will continue to be invested in ministry projects.

Alan, his wife and his children have been able to visit the projects they support and see the impact in people's lives. He exemplifies what Ephesians calls being created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. Alan tells people in a matter of fact manner that God actually owns his business.

Ephesians reminds us that God owns all our business too. So what are the good works that you've been created for? What way of life is your dying and rising preparing you for? Is there anyone that you need to forgive and be reconciled with? Is there some cause for justice or a particular passion for serving in some ministry project being stirred up within you? How might God's gift of grace be transforming you this very moment to stop following the dead-end ways of the world and turn and trust in the one who leads us in the ways of life eternal?

At the heart of both the texts we heard read today is God's love. It's the power of God's love that continually transforms and saves our world. Today, we look towards the one who was lifted up and trust in the power of that love to shine its light upon us no matter what kind of evil we might face.

During the deepest, darkest days of apartheid when the government tried to shut down its opposition by canceling a political rally, Archbishop Desmond Tutu declared that he would hold a church service instead. St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town, South Africa was filled with worshippers. Outside the cathedral hundreds of police gathered, a show of force intended to intimidate. As Tutu was preaching they entered the Cathedral, armed, and lined the walls. They took out notebooks and began recording Tutu's words.

But Tutu would not be intimidated. He preached against the evils of apartheid, declaring it could not endure. At one extraordinary point he addressed the police directly. "You are powerful. You are very powerful, but you are not gods and I serve a God who cannot be mocked. So, since you've already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!"

With that the congregation erupted in dance and song. The police didn't know what to do. Their attempts at intimidation had failed,

overcome by the archbishop's confidence that God's goodness and love would triumph over evil. It was but a matter of time.

Today, we gaze intently once again on the paschal mystery of the one who was lifted up. We trust in this one who willingly entered into the full depth of human suffering and injustice who now opens our hearts in compassion to all who are marginalized and suffering. Today, we come to the light to be schooled in God's ways of love. For what more is salvation than the orchestration of the deeds of our lives being done in God? For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world be saved through him. Today it happens through that body of Christ being lifted up in us. AMEN