A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*Going Through*

John 3

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You have likely already realized that the art on the front cover of the worship guide is a depiction of Jesus and Nicodemus. An imagination of the two of them huddled in the corner of a humble home on a dark night, as the story depicts. You might have thought as you were hearing the Scripture and considering the art at what point in the conversation has the artist captured, has he frozen, as Nicodemus’s hands are lifted in receptivity or confusion and Jesus is instructing him in the mysteries of the faith that Nicodemus did not even know that he was going to hear when he arrived to find Jesus that night. That painting is from an African community in Cameroon and is an evocative and inviting painting, and I invite you to sit with that today and in the coming days as you reflect on this passage.

This passage of Jesus with Nicodemus in John 3 is a well-known passage especially 3:16. A lot of people know John 3:16 and for good reason. *For God so loved the world he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.* Not only does the verse sum the Gospel message in a way we can memorize and celebrate, it’s monumental in the flow of the Gospel of John. It’s the first time in the Gospel love is mentioned, and God’s love is a major theme in the Gospel. It’s the first time the connection between God and the world described as love, which is huge. It’s the first mention of eternal life too. In a lot of ways, John 3:16 represents a tremendous moment in the gospel for everything that will come after it.

So a lot of people know John 3.16. How many know what comes right before it? Probably a lot fewer, and probably fewer still know the story behind it or have thought much about it. Those who have realize that the lesser known John 3:14-15 is just as significant and just as powerful as the more well known verse that follows it. This morning let’s explore John 3.14-15 that we may know this verse, that we may appreciate the fullness of 3.16, that our faith may be strengthened, and that, as we do so, we prepare our hearts to lift high and receive the broken body of Christ represented in the broken bread of the eucharist. It’s all tied together by this verse.

Here’s the verse again: *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.*

If your first thought at that verse is “that’s puzzling,” you’re not alone. Nicodemus, the man Jesus was talking to through all of this, is utterly baffled by everything Jesus has been telling him, about the need to be born again, about the Spirit of God blowing where it will, about the Son of Man descending and ascending to God. He’s stupefied through the whole conversation. But when Jesus says, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of May be lifted up,” I think Nicodemus would have known what he was talking about, at least a little. Nicodemus knew his bible and knew this reference to an obscure story from Numbers 21. Whether he was able to understand the fullness of what Jesus was saying in this moment, I don’t know, but we do know that Nicodemus would be there when Jesus was crucified and would help take his body off the cross. He may not have understood on this night, but he would in due time.

The background story from Numbers 21 is set in the wilderness wanderings of Israel in the Exodus experience. They are not happy—tired, frustrated, hungry, thirsty. Every day was Daylight Savings Time. Grumpy the whole time. And they complain bitterly against Moses and against God. Their complaints unleash from God fiery serpents that bit the people so many of them died. The people immediately understand the connection between their sin and the suffering it had unleashed. “Moses,” they confess, “we have sinned. Pray to the Lord that he take away the serpents from us.” Moses prayed for the snake-bit people. And the Lord responded, “Make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. When a person is bitten, if they will look on the bronze snake on the pole, they will be healed.”

That’s odd. The response to their suffering and death was to look upon the thing that represented their sin and their pain. I think that’s amazing. Make an image of a serpent and that’s how people will be healed from serpents? The biblical image of evil becomes the mediating agent of God’s salvation? It wasn’t an image of God; that wouldn’t have been allowed by the Ten Commandments anyway. It wasn’t an image of a lamb which would have reminded them of God’s protection for them at the Passover. It wasn’t an image of a lion, which would have reminded them of God’s power. It was more like a mirror. They had to look upon the very symbol of evil and suffering, of human frailty and fall, to be saved from it. They had to look squarely on what they had become to be restored to who they were made to be.

About four years ago, the rock band O.A.R. released a song called *I Go Through* that has touched people in ways they don’t fully understand. After hearing the song, one man wrote, “I'm sitting in this hospital bed, and I am extremely nervous, because my counts dropped tremendously, but I can't show that to my beautiful wife and two daughters as I face a terminal illness. Yet this song, for some reason, makes me feel safe and made me smile today.” He wrote to the band, "I hope to see you when you come play in my town. If not, hopefully on the other side.” He signed off, “Semper Fi.”

The chorus is simple: “You go round and around it; you go over and under, I go through.” When we face the hardest things in life, we can’t keep going round and around it, over and under. We have to go through. We have to go right through it. There’s no way around. There was no way around the sea for Israel, they had to go through. There was no way around the wilderness for Israel. They had to go through. And there was no way to go over and under the suffering they were in now. They had to go through. Lift your eyes, and look right on it. And in that, you will be healed. That’s where our healing comes from so often, from looking right at the thing, right square at the thing that’s the problem, and trusting God to see us through.

There’s no going around an exam. There’s no going around a marriage difficulty. There’s no going over or under some of the hardest decisions in life we have to make. There’s no going around some of the conflicts that dog our lives. There’s no going around grief. We have to go through.

It is this story that Jesus picks up to describe his role in our lives. In his retelling in John 3, he’s not Moses lifting up the image. He’s not the pole in Moses’ hands. He’s the thing that is lifted up. *Just as Moses lifted the serpent, so I must be lifted up*. He compares himself to the serpent. Jesus images himself lifted up as the symbol of our sin and our suffering. The words from the prophet Isaiah come home: “by his wounds we are made whole.”

When Israel looked on the bronze serpent, they looked upon the sign of their own sin, and in that, they were healed. When we look on Christ on the cross, we see the one who takes on the sin of the world. By looking on Christ crucified, we are healed of our wounded-ness and all that is within us that has wounded ourselves and has wounded others. He is the way through. I’m so struck by this image.

Elsewhere in scripture Christ is a lamb, a lion, a shepherd, the light of the world . . .each of those images for Christ is meaningful and important. Here, set alongside those beautiful images of our beautiful Lord, he is imaged as the serpent lifted up for all to see and be healed. Here he is imaged as the worst of us made manifest. Is there any length Christ will not go to to love us? Is this the measure of God’s love for all the world, that God gave his only son to become this, that whoever looks upon him in faith will not perish but have eternal life? Yes, thanks be to God. That’s it. There are no lengths to which Christ will not go. There is no depth of humility to which Christ will not condescend. There is nothing Christ will not do to save us including being lifted high on his cross.

Of course, it is not merely a bronze image of a man on the cross that we look upon. It is the very flesh of our Lord on the cross. He is no phantom, no shell of a person, no disembodied spirit; he is true God from true God; fully God, fully man on the cross that we look upon and believe and are saved.

Christians have many many ways of remembering this. And good thing because the snakes are still all around. We have many ways of remembering this in our music. I’m thinking of the great line from *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*,

See from His head, His hands, His feet,  
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!

Did e’er such love and sorrow meet,

Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

I’m thinking of Michelangelo’s stunning pieta at St. Peter’s in Rome—Mary tenderly cradling the lifeless body of her son; I’m thinking of the martyrs who embody in their suffering and in their depths faith to the very end. I’m also thinking, like you may be already as well, of the bread and cup set before us. We raise the bread, one loaf, that symbolizes the body of Christ—the beautiful, holy body of Christ. And then, we break it. We tear the body of Christ in half and then we tear it in pieces one for each of us. Because we want to? No, because we can’t go around the truth. We have to go through. Jesus Christ was lifted high, crucified for us, his body broken, his blood shed for us. It is in looking upon him with the eyes of our hearts that we are healed.

As we come to communion today, I ask you to consider this yet again. To consider the gift of his sacrifice for us, that we may love him more and more, and relish in this grace. He didn’t go around or over or under the world’s condition. He went right through all the way to death on the cross. For us.

Let it be Christ in your hand, and on your lips. With an Amen and a thanks be to God, let him live in you and you in him. As you do may your faith be renewed from above as you remember that this is God’s love—whoever believes will not perish but have eternal life.

Amen.

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