

Title: From Eternity to Here

Text: John 3:14 – 21

Date: March 11, 2018

Within these verses that we just read is a verse that may warm the hearts of some of you . . . or may cause some sort of confused Pavlovian response amongst others. To these categories I might add: *Blessed are those who have no idea what I am referring to, for you may at least have the opportunity to hear with fresh ears.*

As a good Presbyterian I have conceived of a three-point message. First we will look at the verse you always skipped over because it sounded weird; then we will look at the verse *you thought you knew*; and finally we'll look at the verses that I am convinced require sustained personal reflection and meditation.

Prone as we are to take things out of context, we need to be reminded that all that we just read is part of a longer conversation that Jesus was having with Nicodemus, the Jewish leader who came to him at night with some sincere faith questions. The words that we might skip over because they sounded weird, would not have sounded weird to Nicodemus, because he was steeped in what we refer to as the Old Testament scriptures.

We are prone to skip over verse 14, which reads, **“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”** Say what? Nicodemus would have known that this was referring to a bizarre tale in Numbers 21:4–9. In it, we find the people of Israel in the wilderness. They have been delivered from their captivity. And they are now complaining to Moses. **“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”** (v. 5)

Now on a similar occasion in the book of Exodus, God hears the complaints of the people and rains down manna upon them. This time, God sends fiery or poisonous serpents. Whatever they are, they aren't good.

And the people are very sorry they grumbled. They come to Moses, full of remorse for whining, and they beg him to pray to God to take the serpents away. Moses prays. In a curious move, God does *not* take the serpents away. Instead God sends a strange quasi-magical remedy. God tells Moses to make a poisonous serpent out of bronze, and whenever a serpent bites someone, that person could look at the bronze serpent and live.

Did I mention it is a strange story? Oddly enough, I feel I gain some insight into this story by looking at it through the eyes of my wife, who has some kind of phobia about snakes. They terrify her! She is in good company, for it turns out that 36% of people in the U.S. list snakes as their #1 fear. I don't think she would like it if put one on a stick, lifted it up, and said, *“Here honey, take a look at this!”* Yet at the same time, I firmly believe that if we can stare down the thing that terrifies us the most, we can find unparalleled freedom to embrace life. Isn't it curious that our medical profession uses the snake on a stick as a symbol of healing? **“Look at it and live.”** (Numbers 21:8) More on this later.

John 3:16 is the verse most of us think we know: **“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.”**

When we were children, many of us heard our parents say something to us along the lines of, “Mommy loves you soooooo much!” Of course, to convey the extent of your love, the point is to stretch out the “soooooo” as long as possible. So then we are inclined to bring the same thought to bear when we read this verse. “For God sooooo loved the world . . .” To be sure, this is true. God *does* love you sooooo much. But that is *not* what this verse is trying to communicate.

Another meaning of the English word “so” is the sense of “*in this way*” or “*in this manner*.” Try to hear the “so” in *that* sense: “God *so* loved the world. God loved the world *in this way*. God loved the world *in this manner*.” You can see this understanding represented in a handful of recent versions that have resisted the influence of traditional translations. For example, The New English Translation says: “For *this is the way* God loved the world.” The New Jerusalem Bible says: “For *this is how* God loved the world.”

OK. So now we have clarified one thing, and generated another question in the process. In what way did God love the world? What does that refer to? I would say that God loves the world - the actual word being “cosmos” – in a way that was “self-emptying.” (see Phil. 2:7)

Our verse continues: “. . . **so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.**” So much here has been misunderstood! In John, “believe” is always an action verb. It is something you *do*, and must *not* be reduced to giving intellectual assent to a proposition; such as “Jesus is the Son of God.”

So then, actively following in the way and spirit of Jesus leads to “**eternal life,**” but this too is not what most people think. Jesus is not talking about getting a ticket to heaven here, as so many seem to imply. William Sloane Coffin asserts that “**Eternal life refers to a kind of life, not its length.**” We are not talking about unending human existence, but a life lived in communion with Spirit *in the present*.

Clearly there is much more that could be said about this, but isn’t it ironic that many Christians talk about John 3:16 in a way that sounds like a veiled threat? So next time someone asks you whether you believe in John 3:16, just say “Yes, and I love the next verse: **‘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.’**” I rather like the Message translation of this verse: “**God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending his Son – the beloved – merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.**” Is this starting to sound refreshingly different from what you might have imagined?

And here is the part that is going to require some serious reflection on your part. We read, “**Those 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. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people**

loved darkness rather than light.” (vv. 18-19) So often people have a rather frightening notion of “coming before the judgement seat of God.” I would like to suggest that these verses invite a different way of viewing this.

Could it be that these verses suggest a kind of self-judgement, or self-selection? Remember, we are not talking about “belief” here as a kind of intellectual assent. So then those of who “believe in” the Christ - that is *follow* in the way of the self-emptying God - have no sense of condemnation, because they have nothing to prove – no preconception of how their life is *supposed* to look.

By contrast, those who live with a sense of entitlement, those whose ego is in control, those who have a burning sense of what life owes them “are condemned already,” because they refused the self-emptying path of the Beloved.

This is the part where I can’t think for you. You need to reflect deeply, with searing honesty and ask yourself if you are “condemned” already because you refuse to let go of your assumption of how your life is *supposed* to look. Might you prefer the darkness, as opposed to the light of the Christ that invites you to let go of your ego-driven nature?

I might visit you, and your story might sound like the people of Israel we read about in the book of Numbers. You might describe feeling like you are in the desert, and there are scorpions about that sting you, and cause real pain. You may even have names for those scorpions that have become so much a part of your life. You convince me that the pain is real. I believe you.

We have now come full circle, for verse 14 reminds us of that strange remedy. **“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,** [the self-emptying God, the Cosmic Christ must be lifted up] **that whoever believes in him** [that is, whoever follows in this way of self-emptying] **may have eternal life** [that is, have fullness in the Spirit even now].”

Lent is the perfect time to consider our response to the crisis that Jesus, or the Spirit, precipitates. A perfect time to consider our response to the Light, as we reflect on the story of Jesus who persisted, and loved us to the point of a state execution.

I’ve got my hard reflection to do. You’ve got yours. The invitation is to move from a vague sense of eternity, to a very real here and now.
Amen.

John 3:14 – 21 (NRSV)

“And 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.”¹⁴

“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.”