

Scripture Readings for March 14 2021

Numbers 21:4-9 (NIV)

⁴They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵they 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!”

⁶Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷The 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.

⁸The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” ⁹So 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 (NIV)

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

¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸Whoever 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. ¹⁹This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹But 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.

Sermon: The Cross: Love, Medicine, and Justice

Last Sunday afternoon I had a brief glance at the lectionary reading for today¹ and was delighted to discover that it contained one of the most-loved verses in the New Testament: John 3:16. I relaxed, a little too quickly, thinking that this would be a straightforward topic to preach upon. On Tuesday I looked at the passage in more detail and realized that this week's gospel reading is a minefield! That can often be the way, not just with John's gospel, but with much of the Bible, in that many people wish – like Thomas Jefferson - they could edit it with a pair of scissors; keeping the pieces that they like and discarding the rest. Yet if we want to remain faithful to the Bible,² which the global Christian community itself considers to be authoritative, then we have to keep it *all*! And if we do that, I think we'll discover the richness of the whole Bible, as well as appreciate how its various pieces fit together, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes with contrasting tensions. Today's reading is perhaps more of the latter. As we approach the passage, I suggest we have in the back of our minds an image of family life, one that contains *both* love *and* discipline. Both are vitally important in raising healthy children; even if we like one and not the other! In John's language, we're talking about *love and judgment*. We like the love aspect, but not the judgment! Yet for John, this duo is imaged by contrasting light with darkness; you just can't have one without the other. And also bear in mind John's perspective is somewhat black-and-white, with no shades of gray. Let's explore!

Our reading leaps into the latter part of the conversation that Jesus has with that intelligent enquirer, Nicodemus.³ Jesus tells him: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be *lifted up*, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."⁴ What does that mean? During Israel's wanderings in the wilderness, they encountered a plague of poisonous snakes and many people were bitten and died.⁵ The people threw themselves upon the mercy of God, and acknowledged their sinful grumbling towards God and towards Moses. As we heard in our Old Testament reading,

¹ John 3:14-21. Note that this is part of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, John 3:1-21. Moreover, v14 cannot be properly understood without considering v13 (and John 1:51), and how John uses "Son of Man" is slightly different way from the other gospels. More specifically, the Son of Man figure in Daniel 7:13-14 is one "who was *coming* with the clouds of heaven." There is some ambiguity there as to whether he is ascending or descending. While most theologians speak of "ascending" as contextually accurate, it would appear that John adapts this ambiguity to have a *bidirectionality* associated with Jesus as the Son of Man in his own gospel (see also John 6:61–62; 33, 41–42, 51, 58). In John 3:13, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he (Jesus, the Son of Man) knows about *heavenly* things (i.e., the mysteries of God) because he earlier *descended* (from heaven to earth; John 1:14, 51). This contrasts Jesus with other holy figures who were believed to have ascended (say in a vision) and through their "ascents" received heavenly knowledge. For example, Moses went *up* the mountain and then *descended* with God's instructions. Note: Jesus' (the Son of Man) ascension is in the *past* tense here. This verse therefore presupposes an event that is not yet occurred in the gospel narrative but is the reality for the post-resurrection church. This use of the past tense, like the disciples remembering in John 2:22, makes it explicit that the post-resurrection perspective from which the gospel is written.

² The Bible as a whole is referred to as the "canon of Scripture," i.e., the (defining) *rule* or *standard* texts that the Christian community *itself* takes to be *authoritative*.

³ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/A-Confusing-Conversation-with-Nicodemus.pdf> .

⁴ John 3:14-15. See also [1].

⁵ Num 21:4. The writer – in keeping with the theological perspective of the time – saw God as *sending* the snakes.

“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.’”⁶ So Moses did just that and “when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.”⁷ God provided a means of *healing*. Curiously, God’s provision was *not* a natural predator for snakes; the healing involved a human *response*. Incidentally, we are later told that the bronze serpent was stored in the tabernacle is a sacred object. Much later, King Hezekiah discovered that people were worshiping it and so broke into pieces as part of his reforms.⁸ That shows how what starts off as a wholesome means of salvation can sometimes become distorted and turned into superstitious idolatry. A later Jewish writer found it necessary to emphasize that it wasn’t the bronze serpent itself that healed the Israelites, but the saving power *of God*.⁹ And this reminds us of the need to look beyond symbols to appreciate the divine message and power behind them.

That said, John makes the parallel with the bronze serpent, in that “the Son of Man must [also] be *lifted up*, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”¹⁰ John is referring to Jesus being *lifted up* on the cross.¹¹ This symbolism can be understood as the cross being *medicine* that makes us well.¹² We have been stricken by a deadly disease – sin - and the only cure is to look at Jesus dying on the cross and find life through *trusting* in him. As it says in Isaiah 53: “by his wounds we are *healed*.”¹³ The cross, then, provides *healing* and *restoration*. (I will talk more about that later.)

John also says that by trusting in the cross of Jesus we will have “eternal life.”¹⁴ This does *not* mean endless duration of human existence, but it’s a way of describing life as lived in the unending presence of God. To have eternal life is to be given life as a child of God¹⁵ or, using the language of the other gospel writers, we become part of the “kingdom of God.” This new life is *not* something that begins *after* we die, but starts *now*.¹⁶ As John says later: “Eternal life is to *know* God and Messiah Jesus, whom

⁶ Num 21:8. This is the only passage in the New Testament to make this analogy.

⁷ Num 21:9.

⁸ See 2 Kings 18:4.

⁹ See Wisdom (of Solomon) 16:5-7.

¹⁰ John 3: 14-15. Note that active *trusting* is needed, and that is more than just “looking” at the cross.)

¹¹ This elevation – as it were – of Jesus on the cross is mentioned again in John 8:28; 12:32, and later (12:38) John cites Isa 53:1. (Isa 52:13- 53:12 is key text on the *suffering* Messiah.) These statements are the equivalent of the passion predictions in the synoptic Gospels. Note: John uses this “lifting up” also as “exaltation,” even glorification. For John, Jesus’ glory is a triple elevation: him being *lifted up* on the cross, *raised* from the dead, and *ascended* to be with God the Father. These three are to be seen as one continuous “event.” The irony, then, is the *humiliation* of cross reveals the glory of God! This lifting up theme is also connects with the ascent/descent in John 1:51; 3:13 and connects with the traditional apocalyptic figure of the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13. This ascent/descent language also speaks of Jesus’ relationship to God and the world. The Son of Man’s ascent to heaven results in salvation because he is the one who is descended from heaven, as the prologue celebrates.

¹² Thomas Aquinas saw Christ’s Passion as the *medicine* against sin.

¹³ Isa 53:5. For relevant context, see also Isa 52:13 – “See, my servant will . . . be *raised* and *lifted up* and highly *exalted* . . .”

¹⁴ “Eternal life” is not a *quantity* but *quality* of life. This is a major theme of John’s gospel, see John 3:36; 4:14; 5:24; 6:27; 10:10. Paul’s equivalent is being “in Christ.”

¹⁵ See John 1:12.

¹⁶ Theologically, it shifts eschatological expectations into the present; cf. the “now-and-not-yet” kingdom of God.

God sent.”¹⁷ To be “born from above” or to be “born again,” as Jesus says to Nicodemus,¹⁸ arises through the *lifting up* of Jesus on the cross. Jesus then summarizes it all, saying: “For God so *loved* the world that he *gave* his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”¹⁹ These verses announce the *why* of Jesus’ life and his death. God *gave* Jesus to the world because God *loves* the world.²⁰ As the song Matthew played puts it, Jesus “*came from heaven* to earth to show the way” - to which the writer of this gospel would agree. Jesus is *unique*, he is God’s “one and only” and that *particularity* needs to be contrasted with the *inclusiveness* of the “*whoever*” of God’s invitation.²¹ God’s gracious initiative is for *everyone*! God’s intent is to rescue the *whole* world through Jesus, *not* to condemn the world. Even so, God’s love does *not* coerce. The purpose of Christ’s coming is to bring life, not death, nevertheless the gift of life must be accepted and it can be refused.

John goes on to talk about the world’s response in binary terms of darkness and light.²² Jesus is the light of the world,²³ but very presence of light inevitably creates shadows. Even though the light itself shines out - and it cannot be overcome by darkness - it is still possible to shut out the light and create areas of darkness where Jesus can be avoided and evil can continue. John continues: “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.”²⁴ If we *don’t* want our actions to be seen by Jesus, we have to ask *why* is that? And be reassured, if we are willing live as children of the light, there is absolutely nothing to fear.²⁵

What this also means is that divine love is contrasted with judgement, and many find that uncomfortable. But we are in the season of Lent; this topic is proclaimed *not* to induce feelings of guilt, but as an opportunity to reflect and, if need be, repent, and to celebrate God’s *love* revealed in Jesus Christ and respond appropriately. John’s audience saw “judgement” as a *positive* thing, as it meant that all that was ‘wrong’ in the world was going to be finally put right; evil would be vanquished forever by a good God. Put a different way, judgement is an outcome of divine justice, and so we trying to balance

¹⁷ John 17:3.

¹⁸ See John 3:3, 5-7. (Nicodemus was one who, even though he came under the cover of darkness, was coming to the light.)

¹⁹ John 3:16-17. (Note, “believes” is a verb and is active *trust*, not mere intellectual assent.) See also 1 John 4:9-10; Rom 5:8. Note too that John 3:18 implies that those who reject Jesus are *already* condemned. However, John 5:28-29 gives a more traditional view of a *future* final judgment. Care is therefore needed in handling this material in John, and I would say it needs to be compared to other New Testament texts. Even so, in John, it seems to me that human free will is respected and has consequences. But for this to make sense (to me) light needs to be recognized as “light,” and some churches/Christians reflect a poor image of Jesus to the world.

²⁰ The word “world” (Greek: *cosmos*) is the word that John uses to refer to those human beings that are at odds with Jesus and God; see: John 1:10; 7:7; 15:18-19.

²¹ The use of the word “send” in 3:17 correlates with the divine will or intent, the use of the word “gave” underscores God’s love. The *particularity* of Jesus is offensive to many, and this is another aspect of the “scandal of the cross.”

²² This follows on from light and darkness in John 1:4-13.

²³ John 8:12; 12:46.

²⁴ John 3:19-20. This may be John’s attempt at explaining the tension between God’s desire for the world’s salvation and the world’s often negative response.

²⁵ See also John 8:12; Matt 5:13-16; 1 Thess 5:5; Eph 5:8; 1 Pet 2:9

God's *love* and *justice*. As I have said before, we all want God's grace for ourselves and God's justice applied to others! We can also respond here with "what-about-isms"! For example, "What about those of other faiths?" In response, I suggest those of other faiths were *not* on John's radar here. If anything, John was concerned about those Jews who had rejected Jesus as the Messiah, and would like to persuade them otherwise.²⁶ So let's not be sidetracked or see John's words out of context. And let's also remember that Jesus himself is the final judge, for God has delegated that task to him. That, I believe brings hope because our judge is someone who knows from first-hand experience the complexities of the human condition. I personally have confidence that the ascended Jesus, who is sometimes referred to as the Wisdom of God²⁷ and who "knows all that can be known," is the right person to lovingly balance divine mercy and justice.²⁸ Frankly, I don't know how Jesus, the good shepherd, is going to do that, but I trust that he can and will!

Now, let's go back to the image of Jesus as medicine for sin, that his being lifted up on the cross provides healing and restoration. I like this image of restoration, because it resonates. Many people love to *restore* things, rather than simply scrap them, because they perceive some inherent value in the items that is worth lovingly saving. This could be an old car, even a classic car, or a piece of furniture, a musical instrument, a painting, or a building, etc. And, yes, the restoration process is costly in terms of time, money, and commitment. It's really an act of *love*, one that once complete many can appreciate. I also think we need to revision God's justice *not* as punishment but as *restoration*. God thinks creation and rebellious humankind are worth restoring, putting right what has gone wrong, including restoring relationships and restoring God's good creation. That's the goal; restorative healing is a long, transformative process. Are we in or are we out? God's rescue plan is also costly, but God evidently thinks it's worth it, "For God so *loved* the world that he came himself in the form of Jesus Christ to personally pay the price of healing our brokenness. He was lifted up on the cross and everyone who actively *trusts* in him - and his act of saving - receives life and are called children of God. Again, are we in or are we out? That's God's restorative justice, one that also reveals the depth of the Creator's *love* for creation. What is *our* response?

As we recall the words of the Good Friday hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," may our response be that of its writer, Isaac Watts: "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." And that also means our trusting in the cross is demonstrated in our working to reveal and reflect the light of Christ to all those around us. Or, in the words of our opening hymn, we are willing "Lift high the cross, the *love* of Christ proclaim, 'til all the world adore his sacred name." Amen. Let us pray.

²⁶ See John 1:9-12; 20:30-31.

²⁷ See 1 Cor 1:24, 30. (Adapting Old Testament concepts, Jesus is also regarded as the personification of the divine Word and Wisdom.)

²⁸ See also John 10:14-16. This also gives me confidence that Jesus knows the human heart (and its hurts), and can handle the matter of those of other faith traditions. (I could say much more, but this is not the place!)