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John 3: 1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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.

'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.

'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.

SERMON:

(To access slides/images, click [HERE](#) and begin on slide 22)

Back, sometime at the beginning of Covid, Tierra Williams, (SLIDE) a local activist, reached out to me, asking if I was willing to be a part of her show 'Black Tea' - where she hosted conversations within State College around topics of racial inequities, religion, politics and police brutality,

Sure, I said, but how about if it's not just me, but several pastors? - and soon enough my pastor friends Jes Kast, Bonnie Kline Smeltzer and I were masked up in a studio with Tierra.

Masks came off and Cameras were rolling -

oof...

within seconds I knew I was in over my head - the conversation was moving fast, from topic to topic, and I felt several steps behind. When Tierra finally turned to me - the mute one with eyes like a deer in headlights, I blurted out something that made little sense, just trying to enter into the ping pong, faster- than-light conversation somewhere.

When the cameras stopped and there was a moment of silence - humiliated, I thought, what just happened? Hopefully no one will see this...

And so I have an affection for Nicodemus here -

the guy shows up at night - why? (IMAGE) Maybe he was scared of being seen? We don't know. There's so much we don't know about N. He makes an opening statement, and then the conversation goes totally sideways. Jesus throws out a non sequitur - "*Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*"

Where did that come from?

Poor N - he didn't know he was meeting the Jesus of John's gospel - where nothing is only what it seems. In this gospel, bread is not plain bread - it's the Bread of Life; water is not plain water - it's Living Water. Every noun in this gospel that has anything to do with Jesus is symbolically capitalized.¹

And so we never learn why N showed up that night. He got pulled into a deep discussion, actually mostly monologue, where this birth Jesus is talking about, is not plain birth. It has nothing to do with talking your mother into letting you back in so she can push you out again....

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. 2019. *Holy Envy: Finding God in the faith of others*. Harper Collins Publishing, NY.

Nicodemus, trying to find his footing in this conversation that took a hard turn - is looking for clarity, but what he gets instead is a teaching that seems designed to keep him in the dark..."How can these things be?" - that's the last thing N says in this story. Is he still there, listening, as the monologue continues? We don't know. N vanishes from the story.

So let's name that this is a tricky passage - honest theologians name it as hard, confusing and needing a lot of context.

Let's take a look. Jesus proclaims: (IMAGE)

"If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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.

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness... note that line - we'll come back to it. The reading continues:

'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.

'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.' (John 3: 12-17)

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

...this verse, sometimes referred to as 'the gospel in a nutshell' is often used to emphasize belief. As if a simple proclamation, a single prayer, is all Jesus asks of us.

But, if Nicodemus has anything to teach us - it's that what Jesus is saying isn't quite so simple.

Let's step back in time and get a little context -

While this passage about an afterlife of salvation was being written, the Roman Empire was pushing Jesus followers underground and following up with persecution.

The conversation with Nicodemus is set before Jesus is crucified, but it was written about 50 years afterward.

The earliest followers of Jesus, themselves facing the threat of execution, were still trying to imagine how a leader who was brutally executed by the empire could be their Messiah. The Messiah was not supposed to be crucified but was expected to officiate a peaceful rule from Zion. The idea of salvation through belief in a crucified leader was a scandalous theological innovation.²

Here, in John's gospel, God's nonviolent love is ultimately revealed with Jesus being lifted up on the cross, like Moses' bronze serpent. That's where we ultimately see that God doesn't respond to human violence with more violence; rather, God responds with divine love for the whole world.

So (IMAGE) how does Moses' bronze serpent fit in?

Stay with me here - we need to go back to a couple of stories in the Hebrew Bible.

In Numbers 21 — which includes the story of Moses lifting up the snake — the Israelites are wandering in the wilderness following the Exodus from Egypt. And they are growing impatient with year after year of hiking around the Sinai Peninsula. They don't like the food and there's not enough water. And in one of those classic Hebrew Bible moments, God responds to their complaints by sending "poisonous serpents among the people."

As those poisonous serpents are biting people, the Israelites stopped complaining about the quality of the food, and started praying for God to contain the snakes. In response (IMAGE) God told Moses to "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

That is the immediate background the writer of the Gospel of John has in mind.

Just as Moses lifted up a bronze serpent to cure people bitten by the snakes, so God lifted up Jesus "that everyone who believes in him, *who trusts in him*, may not perish but may have eternal life."

But we have to dive deeper still in our search for the rest of the story.

Let's jump to another story in the Hebrew Bible -

In 2 Kings 18, we're told King Hezekiah "did what was right in the sight of the Lord." (IMAGE) We learn: Hezekiah "Removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole."

² <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/lectionary/march-5-lent-2a-john-31-17>

The high places, pillars, and sacred pole are all associated with idolatry — worshiping gods other than Yahweh.

But it is the second part of that verse that is particularly relevant: “[Hezekiah] broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it.” Apparently, the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness was kept in the Temple as a relic. Over time, people had begun to worship Moses’ bronze serpent as an idol.

Ironically, the bronze serpent had originally been built to remind the Israelites to trust God, to look to God for healing and salvation — to stop complaining about minor inconveniences like food quality and to be grateful for major events like freedom from oppression. In Hezekiah’s day that same bronze serpent had become an end in itself. Judeans were worshiping the snake instead of the God to whom the statue pointed. So, that idol-smashing King Hezekiah “broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made.”

Wow - (IMAGE) - from the book of Numbers to 1 Kings, and back to our story -

The writer of the Gospel of John finds healing in Jesus being lifted up on the cross (IMAGE)— just as the Israelites found healing in Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. But in the account of King Hezekiah, we see how the symbol of the serpent has hardened. It no longer points beyond itself to God. Instead it has become a simplistic formula: if you want to be healed, go visit the bronze snake in the Temple.

But God cannot be reduced to a formula.

Today, for many Christians, John 3:16 has become this same sort of quick fix: read this verse and you’re saved. Done and done. But God cannot be reduced to a formula — neither can the way of God, revealed in the life of Jesus. And just as in Hezekiah’s day, the idol of John 3:16 needs to be broken.

Like the bronze serpent, John 3:16 alone is an insufficient guide for healing and salvation. Instead, we need an authentic encounter with the Mysterious, Loving, and Gracious Presence that we call God — and we need to actively live it out by following the way of Jesus.

John 3:16 ALONE is not enough to form a fully mature Christian life.

The Good News here - Living a life centered on trusting Jesus, not simply believing in him, demands that we move past the idols, the quick fixes of salvation, and enter into relationship through doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God - and loving God and neighbor as our primary lens of faithful living.

We must live *in such a manner* everyday. (IMAGE)

May we learn to love the world *in this way* — as God so loves the world.³

³ [“John 3:16 — The Rest of the Story” \(A Progressive Christian Lectionary Commentary for Sunday, March 18, 2012\) | Carl Gregg](#)