

John 3:14-21

¹⁴“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten 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. ¹⁸The one who believes in him is not condemned, but the one who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God. ¹⁹This is the basis for the judgment: The light has come into the world, yet people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰In fact, everyone who practices wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, or else his deeds would be exposed. ²¹But the one who does what is true comes toward the light, in order that his deeds may be seen as having been done in connection with God.”

It's History

I.

The problem with history is that it's history. Looking back from the perspective of today it is impossible to put yourself completely in the shoes of historical figures because the final outcome is already a matter of history. You know the outcome before you ever consider the details.

The fickle bunch of people from history didn't already know the outcome when they complained about the oppression they suffered. Relief was fleeting before the next wave of disaster struck. This happened again and again. Time after time the people whined and murmured. One problem after another was solved or removed, just to be replaced by yet another.

In the first verse of our text, Jesus made reference to the history of Israel. “Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness” (John 3:14, EHV). Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus and others gathered around him when he made that reference. These descendants of the People of Israel who exited Egypt for the Promised Land knew the long, sordid history of that epic journey.

The people grumbled about the oppression of slavery in Egypt. God sent Moses to intercede with Pharaoh. The plagues were part of the deal. Oppression *increased*, rather than decreasing, but the people couldn't see the bigger picture or understand God's plan. Finally the journey out of Egypt began. The people were ecstatic—for about one hot second—until Pharaoh's army pursued them and trapped them at the banks of the Red Sea. Once across, Moses ascended Mt. Sinai to speak with God. The people became nervous and persuaded Moses' brother Aaron to melt down all their jewelry into a Golden Calf—which they bowed down to and danced around in worship. God caused a special food, called manna, to fall from the sky to the desert floor so that they would have something to eat, even in a barren wilderness, every day of their journey.

When you look back over the days and years of that journey, time after time Israel abandoned the true God, who had proven himself to them to *be* God, for gods of their own choosing or making. Their gods were freedom from oppression and slavery, escape from Pharaoh's army, the Golden Calf, their own stomachs, aching for a meal. Really, all of them were the god of self. *I'll* decide what *really* important. God should conform to *my* wishes, because *I'm* really in charge.

The people were engrossed in their own little moment, not seeing the big picture of history, because they were living it. They couldn't see God's guarding and guiding hand. So it is that at the time of today's Old Testament Lesson they turned again to complaining about the cuisine. “The people spoke against God and against Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? Look, there is no food! There is no water! And we are disgusted by this worthless food!’” (Numbers 21:5, EHV).

Their invention of their own gods was sin. Their grumbling against God and Moses, his spokesman, was sin. “The LORD sent venomous snakes among the people, and the snakes bit the people. As a result many people from Israel died” (Numbers 21:5, EHV).

Unless you are new to Christianity and this is the first time you have heard this account from the history of Israel, you already knew the ending. “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a venomous snake and put it on a pole. If anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will live.’” Moses made a bronze snake and put it on the pole. If a snake had bitten anyone, if that person looked at the bronze snake, he lived” (Numbers 21:5, EHV).

II.

Jesus reminded his listeners of this event to connect it to himself, yes, but there was another reason. We are not reading about 2018 ten or fifty or 100 years in the future—we are living it. We have the same problem Israel had—we cannot see the bigger picture of God’s guarding and guiding hand, so all too often we create gods of *our* own making.

Jesus says: “The light has come into the world, yet people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19, EHV). We have so much love for the world that we don’t see the world as darkness. People of the 21st Century are a product of the Age of Enlightenment. There is so much in our world that is so awesome that, without even realizing it, we begin to worship the world—or at least the things mankind has done with it. A group labeled the “New Optimists” reminds us that nobody in their right mind should wish to have lived in a previous century. Globally, people are rising out of extreme poverty. The child mortality rate has plummeted. Literacy and sanitation worldwide are at an all-time high. People of this century enjoy luxuries medieval citizens couldn’t even imagine (<https://tinyurl.com/y8x5caee>).

We enjoy access to things and foods from all over the world at nominal cost. Great cuisine, lower rates of disease, plenty of technological advances. It seems that most of the problems of this world can be dealt with by our superior knowledge and technology. God should just make sure we have ease of life—that’s the best way.

Just like Israel, we have come to think that we, the people, know best. God—if he even exists—should bend his will to *our* ways, not impose his own on us. Our gods have become the convenience and materialism of our world. We focus less attention on God because we don’t focus very much on our sinful condition. We think of ourselves as enlightened, so we don’t recognize the reality that we live in—and love—the darkness. Our deeds are evil.

III.

This is the reality of our world. Every age and generation has had the same problem, encased in a different set of immediate circumstances. People throughout history have continually thought they know better than God. That was the temptation leveled at our first parents, to which they succumbed. The devil told them they could be like God, knowing good and evil. The people of Noah’s day would not listen to Noah’s warnings, and were destroyed by the waters of the Great Flood. Those who settled on the plains of Babel were convinced they could build a monument to their own ingenuity, rather than obey God’s command to fan out and repopulate the world. Crowds of people chanted “Hosanna!” one day, and called for the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus a few days later. The church in Luther’s time had turned the gospel from light into darkness. And those of today think we know better than God, too.

It is into all this mix that Jesus says: “God so loved the world” (John 3:16, EHV). This is the world God loved. The world full of people who think they know better than he. He loved *this* world, when all the inhabitants thereof have given him nothing but grief. He loved—and loves—*this* world in which people continually feel they know better than God.

And how does he love? People love all kinds of things and people, don’t they? I *love* pastor’s sermons, especially when they aren’t too long. I love basketball in March. I love pizza. I love my children and my spouse. We use the same word for all kinds of things, and you have to figure out

by context what is really implied.

The Greek language Jesus was speaking has several words for love—each focusing on a different type of love. The word Jesus specifically chose indicates undeserved love—a love that loves even when there is no redeeming quality that would prompt that love. In fact, just the opposite is true. As we have seen, all the thoughts and attitudes of mankind should revile God and make him turn his back on us in disgust.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16, EHV). The gospel in a nutshell, this verse is sometimes called. Spoiler alert—we’ll consider this verse again on Trinity Sunday, when the gospel pericope starts at the beginning of the chapter and goes to verse 17.

Jesus goes on: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten 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” (John 3:16-17, EHV). In verse 17 Jesus tells us that God didn’t send Jesus to condemn the world, despite how the people of the world have behaved through century after century, and how we continue to feel and believe today. God loved us so much that he wanted much, much more for us than what we deserve. He didn’t restrict that love to some and not others, but sent Jesus to pay for the sins of the whole world.

Some don’t understand this truth because they are obscured by the darkness and refuse to come out of it, but the truth is there that Jesus has brought redemption for the world. “The one who believes in him is not condemned, but the one who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God” (John 3:18, EHV).

IV.

That takes us back to Jesus comparing his upcoming death on the cross to the snake in the wilderness. Imagine little Joshua or Caleb in the camp of Israel asking their parents about the snake on the pole in the center of the camp. “Mommy, daddy, I watched as people were bitten by snakes. They died. Why am I supposed to look over there at that snake on a pole when I get bit? It doesn’t make any sense.” “It sure doesn’t, little Joshua, little Caleb. God promised that when you look, you will live. Looking at the bronze snake shows that you believe God’s promise.”

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:14-15, EHV). Lifted up. Sometimes we use that term when we refer to ourselves lifting up God’s Name in prayer, or lifting up our praises to God. When the Bible uses that term “lifting up,” however—especially in the gospels—it is not referring to praise. Rather, “lifting up” is a metaphor for crucifixion.

It doesn’t make any sense that the hero of the Christian faith was executed on a cross. How can it possibly help *us* that *he* was put to death? Many don’t believe it because it doesn’t seem reasonable to modern sensibilities. But what draws our praise to be lifted up to God is that *he* was lifted up as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Paul says in our Second Lesson: “God, because he is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in trespasses. It is by grace you have been saved!” (Ephesians 2:4-5, EHV).

The great thing about history is that it is history. You can see the bigger picture because you are not caught up in the challenges of the moment, but can see how all the pieces fit into a puzzle that spans years, or centuries, or millennia.

Keep what Jesus has done in the context of history. You *know* the final outcome, even as we go through the Lenten season. You *know* that, though Jesus was lifted up on the altar of the cross for our salvation, he rose again victorious on Easter Sunday. *Your* sins have been covered and paid for. So have the sins of the world. Bring the perspective of history to those who are still wandering around in the darkness, so they may see the light that has come into the world. Amen.