

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. For those of us who have been in the church for a long time, those words or words like them are very familiar indeed. John 3:16 is emblazoned on so many bumper stickers, signs, talismans and t-shirts that you might think it represents a political candidate's new best catchphrase rather than a statement of a religious belief.

Will mentioned this verse on the first Sunday of Lent, and reminded us of our tendency to read this verse either in isolation or through the eyes of an already-developed theology. In some ways, it's a practice that makes sense. Scripture is present in our lives to bring both comfort and understanding. When this verse is taken on its own, it does an excellent job at serving both of those goals. After all, how many verses testify to the love of God, the passion of Jesus, and the promise of eternal life with such intertwined beauty.

Still, one of the wonderful things about the lectionary is its refusal to let us sit in this safe sound-bite approach to scripture. In broadening the context just a little, questions pour in. Before that most famous verse we've got Jesus comparing himself to a snake that being lifted up in the wilderness, and after it we've got a man declaring that he didn't come to condemn the world doing a rather suspicious amount of condemning.

A look at the broader context of John's gospel is instructive here. The Gospel of John came to be known as the spiritual gospel very early on in the life of the church, and that meant focusing in on the meaning of Jesus' life for the church rather than historical details. The result is that certain aspects of Jesus' personality are amplified. For John, Jesus is unapologetically provocative, not only unafraid to offend, but sometimes going out of his way to offend the religious people of his day. Because John was the last gospel to be written, it also means that Christianity had had some time to develop, and when John was putting pen to parchment, his John's community was experiencing increasing tension with the larger synagogue. Christianity had attracted many Gentile followers, but most Jews had rejected Jesus as the Messiah, and in John's time, many Jewish Christians were being asked to leave the synagogue.

With that backdrop, let us return to our story, and to Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a leader of the Jewish establishment. Nicodemus is an honest seeker here – or at least as honest as I am – so I tend to think that the historical tension that developed between church and synagogue is part of why Jesus treats the Jewish leader so harshly here. Nicodemus had seen signs from Jesus and believed in him because of them. He then came to Jesus to glean more wisdom. That he comes at night implies both that he wanted this conversation to take place in secret for fear of what other Jewish leaders might think, and also that he was coming from a place of “spiritual darkness” in the sense of lack of understanding.

Nicodemus opens the conversation very respectfully, addressing Jesus as Rabbi, and as a teacher who has come from God. Jesus responds that one must be born from above to truly see the kingdom of God. This is rather difficult to understand so Nicodemus takes the bait and asks how such a thing can be possible. Jesus rebukes Nicodemus, a man who is supposed to be a teacher, for his lack of understanding before going on to answer his question.

So... how *is* this possible? That's where our reading picks up with a comparison. 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. This is quite clearly a reference either to Jesus' death or his ascension, but what's up with snake?

It's a reference to a story from the Old Testament in the book of Numbers. At that time the people of Israel weren't quite the geographical people of Israel. They'd been out of Egypt for a long while, but had spent several years wandering in the wilderness. As it turns out, desert life wasn't always the most pleasurable and so they began to complain against God and Moses saying, "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." I always chuckle at that second complaint about the food. I guess it must have been really bad! Then I remember that the food they're complaining about is the miraculous manna that God had sent from heaven.

That's definitely a foot-in-mouth situation. God was not impressed. Thankfully, he forgives them immediately. Right? No? Not so much. Instead, he sends poisonous snakes that bite and kill many of the people. When the Israelites repent, God has Moses make a bronze serpent, which he sets on a pole so that anyone who had been bitten but hadn't yet died might look at it and live, helping them to remember both the judgment and mercy of God, and helping us to squirm a little.

For God so loved his people that he gave them grace through a serpent on a stick, so that everyone who looked upon it may not perish but may be restored to 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.

I said before that John sometimes uses Jesus' voice in a manner that is designed to offend, and I must admit that, at times, I'm offended. I cringe a little at the vindictiveness of God in Numbers, and cringe a little more at John's use of that story to help his readers understand their relationship with Jesus. As the passage moves on from there, I find John's dualism extremely challenging. You are either condemned or saved, a person who loves darkness because his

deeds are evil or a person who loves the true light that is Jesus Christ because she does what is true.

For John, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that's not because the world isn't condemned; it's because the world was already condemned. The world was in the same state as the people of Israel in Numbers after they had rebelled. The world was condemned and in need of grace.

Jesus on the cross, then, is many things. Many of us are happy to understand him as the means of God's grace. We are perhaps a little bit less eager to understand him as a reminder of the depth of our sinfulness. The passage we read today testifies to both realities. It also testifies that Jesus is an outpouring of God's love, not just for the people of Israel, but for the entire world.

It's tempting to leave things there, but that would ignore a rather large elephant in the room. It's quite possible for us modern folks to be offended even by this outpouring of love. After all, what kind of parent voluntarily gives a child over to die for any reason. It's a question that rings out even when answers are expressed, but still, I find it helpful to wonder. What kind of parent? One who believes the cause is good and noble. One who believes that his child is fighting for something of immense importance. One who is willing to let his child fulfill what he understands to be his destiny. One whose love for you and I is deeper than we could ever imagine. This is the good news. Thanks be to God.