

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt
Fourth Sunday of Lent - Year B
54th Week of the Pandemic
Numbers 21:4-9
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

[Jesus said:] 14“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16“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.”

The Gospel of Our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

People of Hope

Good morning! Doctor Mary Sue Dreier was one of my favorite professors at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary. And like a lot of professors, she started off as a pastor. Specifically, she and her husband were mission developer pastors in the midwest. So when they moved to somewhere in what I think was Minnesota, they needed to come up with a name for the church they were starting. Pastor Gary, her husband, was a musician and so they had several names they liked that had something to do with hymns or music. They eventually came up with around 10 different names for a church that they liked and decided that the best way to pick one was to test it out. So they spent a day outside a Wal-Mart with a clipboard and as people walked by they asked them what church they would be interested in going to based only on a name. The name that was picked the most, and which became the name of their congregation, was A People of Hope. And so A People of Hope Lutheran Church was born.

I share this because I think the name of that congregation captures perfectly the central message of what we have read today in the Gospel of John. What is arguably the most famous piece of scripture calls on all of us to be people of hope. Unfortunately, the popularity of this text has created problems of its own. We have seen this text everywhere. In sporting events across the country the words “John 3:16” have been written on homemade signs as they are waved. It’s been on bumper stickers and church car magnets across the world. As Paul C. Shupe writes *“How does one preach a text that has become a cliché? How is life to be pumped back into the words that are so well known that they can no longer be heard?”*¹

¹ Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word. Year B, Volume 2.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 116.

The other issue is the damaging ways this piece of scripture has been used. Instead of being a message about hope it has been used as a threat. The angry street corner preacher who warns you to repent or ELSE! How many of us have been handed a pamphlet with some suitably threatening message about our damned souls with this verse attached? Or have you walked back to your car from the grocery store or mall and found a similar pamphlet under the windshield wiper? Yes, the threat has been heard.

But I am here today to tell you that this text has been taken hostage, and it's time for us to reclaim it and the message of salvation and hope that rests at its core. So let's take a closer look. It can be a little confusing because we start the story off halfway through a story. Nicodemus, some sort of Jewish religious leader, has approached Jesus under the cover of darkness to ask a few questions. He is curious about everything he has heard about Jesus, but not enough to be seen talking to Jesus in front of others. So, he shows up at night. Now, it probably goes without saying, but at night it's pretty dark. Especially 2,000 years ago. No electricity back then, so Nicodemus' visit can be under cover. But as the Gospel of John has made clear time and time again, God has come to bring light into the world.

Another confusing point can be the story from the book of Numbers that was our first reading. I'll let the words of Jouette M. Bassler explain the connection: *"The point of the comparison between Jesus and the quasi-magical totem is that the serpent had to be lifted up so that the Israelites could see it and receive its life-saving benefits. So too the Son of Man must be lifted up so that those who believe might receive eternal life. The phrase refers both to Jesus being lifted up on the cross and to Jesus being lifted up to heaven."*²

² Ibid. p. 117.

So the text calls on us to look at our sin, just like the Israelites in the wilderness. We stare at the cross, confess our sin, and are confronted with the reality that our actions will lead to death... And in that moment of deep and dark despair, upon that cross that had always represented death... something amazing happens! The sun starts to rise... shining a light into that darkness and showing us another way. God puts an end to that darkness and brings us into light and life! Stop and look at the words from our text again. Ignore what you've heard before and look closer! *6“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.”* My internship supervisor Pastor Rick Carter always said that people pay so much attention to verse 16 that they forget about vs. 17, and I agree! God isn't trying to punish us, God is trying to save us! One scholar writes that *“It is possible to read the whole of Scripture, from the creation to the eschaton, as God's love story for the world.”*³ And it's true! We don't call it the greatest love story ever told for no reason. This piece of scripture is about how we have run away, time after time, telling a God who has given us absolutely everything that we want to hide in the darkness, and how that God, that patient and loving God, comes to us again and again telling us yes when we say no. So God invites us ever so gently, taking us by the hand and leading us back into the light of life. And God doesn't stop there! God helps us find others who are lost in the darkness too!

Paul C. Shupe finishes his commentary on this section of scripture with a question, one that I'll put to you: *“What if a preacher called upon*

³ Ibid. p. 118.

her or his congregation to join in the creation of a community in which God's love was regarded not as being in short supply, open only to those who have seen and confessed Jesus as the Christ, but rather as poured out upon the entire world? If we see this vision, it is precisely because Jesus is the Christ, the sure and confident sign of the very best we know: God so loved the world..."⁴ God so loved the world indeed... Amen.

⁴ Ibid. p. 120.