

“JOHN 3: 16”

John 3: 1-21

The problem with our scripture passage today is that everyone knows it.

The other problem with our scripture passage today is that everyone knows it.

Or, at least they think they know it.

John 3:16 was called “The Gospel in Miniature” by Martin Luther. It has been plastered in football stadiums on a regular basis. I’ve seen it in the middle of a farmer’s field. I even see it on ZOOM!

It is so prevalent that we are not even aware of its presence and meaning. Kind of like billboards along the highway that we do not even notice anymore.

This passage from John 3 has at least three parts: The passage from Numbers, the encounter with Nicodemus, and Jesus’ response to both. So, let’s look at all three.

The Old Testament passage helps continue our prejudice that the God of the Old Testament is a ruthless and merciless God. It portrays an angry God that is contradictory to our understanding of God.

We see that the Israelite people were very impatient with God and Moses on their way to the Red Sea. In fact, they were just angry - - you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? What kind of promise and life is that? Who can we depend on? There is no food or water and the food we have is not even decent.

So God sent poisonous snakes throughout the land which bit the people, and lots of Israelites died from the snake bites. It was not a pretty sight. In fact, it was downright disgusting.

Some people realized the sinfulness of the people and pled to Moses to pray to God for relief. Which Moses did. God directed Moses to put a serpent made of bronze on a pole. When people got bitten by a snake, they could look at the pole and be able to live.

Rather different. Part I: Snakes for a cure

Part II: Nicodemus

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, had heard about this Jesus and went under the cover of night to see him. Nicodemus was looking for help and for answers. He was in a darkened corner in his life and wanted direction.

Yet Nicodemus missed completely what Jesus was talking about. If you want to see the Kingdom of God, you have to be born from above. Literal-

minded Nicodemus heard Jesus say he had to be born again in his mother’s womb. He missed it entirely. And he was educated and smart...at least Jesus declared, “Are you a teacher of Israel and yet do not understand these things?”

Part II: Clueless Nicodemus

Now before we move to part three, let’s let these two stories sink in:

-bizarre way to be healed - - with snakes

-clueless, educated religious leader - - literal minded Nicodemus.

I hate to say it, but are these not two stories about you and me? Aren’t we often blind to the ways off God and do not believe some things are God given? Aren’t we sometimes too educated to realize the simple yet powerful Gospel message?

-How often do we scoff at people’s ideas that see God working differently than is our experience?

-How often do we box God into a neat formula or expected way we think God operates?

-How often are we shocked at what happens to our neighbor which turns out to be a Godsend?

-How often do we worry about the correct words and terminology before we can talk about God?

-How often are we hesitant to declare what God has done in our life because people will think we are a religious ‘nut’?

-How often have we recited the Apostles’ or Nicene Creeds perfectly from memory and have no clue what it means that Jesus descended into hell?

-How often do we shake our heads at things that occur knowing full well it could not be God given or driven?

Friends, the God we worship is an awesome God. He uses snakes to cure people. He befuddles brilliant minds and smart people with simple solutions. He is ever present with us even if we do not realize it or acknowledge the fact. He bends over backwards for this world that often times is not worth the time of day.

BUT! That is God. Clear and simple. Showering us with mercy when we do not deserve it. Desiring a personal relationship with us even while we scoff at him. Wanting to be in partnership with people who really are slysters!

And most of us cannot comprehend such an approach to life. So, now on to Part III: Jesus’ response.

In the context of these first two parts is the context for Jesus declaring John 3:16. Knowing that context is very helpful.

Jesus compares himself to a serpent! (Have to admit I never made that connection before!). Yet, just as the bronze serpent on the pole helped people to live, so Jesus on the cross will provide life through salvation and eternal life.

They are parallel. For serpents will heal you. And crucifixion on the cross will save you for eternal life.

I have to admit that comes across rather confusing. Yet, Roger Gench, in his commentary on this passage helped me to understand the parallel for healing and salvation.

Roger says, "Scientists have learned how to replicate bacteria and viruses, render them nonlethal and inject them back into the body as vaccines. When a vaccine is injected, our human immune system goes to work producing killer memory cells against various diseases. So a disease can turn out to be a vaccine against disease."

Even the American Medical Association adopted the healing snake on a pole as its logo. Jesus too speaks of healing in drawing this image to himself.

The point Roger is making is that a disease heals a disease. That the very thing that causes illness can be used to help kill off the bad cells in our bodies. I assume the vaccines now in use for COVID-19 use the same or similar principles.

So, translated to our faith: Jesus' death on the cross to take on the sins (the diseases if you will) of the world helped to cure the disease (sin). In other words, Jesus had to die for us to be saved.

I asked students in my class this spring why did Jesus die? I was speculating was that the only way it could have happened for us to be saved? Could God not have just sprinkled God dust all over the earth and we would be ok?

They had a harder time than I thought they would have had in answering the question. What if I asked you the same question: Why did Jesus have to die versus any other way to save the world? What would you say? How would you explain it to a person seeking salvation? I'm sorry we are not in the sanctuary so I could take a microphone around to various ones of you to get a response - kind of like a sermon "pop quiz!"

For me, when God created the world -- Adam and Eve -- people were without sin. Yet, they ate of the forbidden fruit -- which never was said to be an apple! In so doing, they desired to become like God knowing the difference between good and evil.

The New Testament tells us that the wages of sin is death. The 'disease' we all will get one day is death. And death happens because of the sinful nature of the world.

Therefore, to my way of understanding, Jesus had to die. He had to face the ultimate disease and conquer it. Which he did on Easter Sunday morning. He rose from the dead. In so doing he faced the disease we all have (staying with the medical analogy), defeated it, and through God's love and only God's love was raised from the dead. So, that death no longer has a hold on us. And it is no longer the dreaded disease of all times. That's why Jesus had to die. Nothing else would work. Or else the disease would continue going rampantly throughout the world.

John 3:16, then, becomes the reason Jesus died and why belief in him is possible:

Because God loved the world so much that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish (die) but have eternal life. Which was the original purpose we were created for in Genesis!

I think John 3:16 is simply too hard to believe. We don't deserve it. We are not good enough for it. We are not worthy. We continue to mess up. We will never be able to look God in the face.

John's Gospel often uses the images of light and dark. Jesus is the light of the world. People have walked in great darkness.

Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark. He came by night because he could not stand for people to know he was seeking Christ.

And I wonder if that is really the meaning of this passage: we would rather stay in the dark. We would rather keep our secrets. We would rather stay in the shadows. After all, it is our little secret! Our family secret!

One of the great shortcomings of the institutional church, of mainline churches is that we often do not bear one another's burdens. We are not comfortable sharing our shortcomings and mistakes. We have to keep up the image. We do not want to be labelled.

Yet here in the church -- called South Plains Presbyterian Church -- is where we can share these secrets. Where we can walk in the light instead of the dark. Where we can finally be able to give up our excuses or our fears. Here is where the light is to shine: that is Jesus Christ who entered this dark world of our sinfulness and beat it good!

As we live into Jesus' life and his practices, we too experience the light and the true goodness of God's life. Because we experience afresh the fact that:

God so loved the world (including me!) that he gave his only Son that whoever (no restrictions) believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

That's the gift. And that gift is yours with your name on it. Receive it!