

# Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 14, 2021

## John 3:14-21

<sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup>“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. <sup>17</sup>“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. <sup>18</sup>Those 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. <sup>19</sup>And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup>For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But 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.”

## Commentary on John 3:14-21

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Jesus remains in Jerusalem in John 3:1-21, not leaving until verse 22 when he returns to the Judean wilderness, perhaps baptizing (see verses 22 and 26; contradicted by John 4:2).

John 3:1-21 records a nighttime conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, one of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, a Pharisee by association. Although the passage for this week does not begin until this conversation has moved from dialogue (verses 1-9) to monologue (verses 10-21), understanding the larger context of 3:14-21 is crucial for interpretation. As part of the larger story of Jesus' first trip to Jerusalem for a Passover festival, John 2:13-3:21 foreshadows Jesus' later controversies in the Gospel which lead to his final Passover in Jerusalem

(John 12-20). In 2:13-3:21 Jesus challenges others to see in him God's unexpected means of deliverance.

Jesus and Nicodemus have a far-ranging conversation in John 3, but the most important part for us begins in verse 10. At this point, Jesus takes over speaking and first ridicules Nicodemus' confusion (or purposeful antagonism) with a derisive comment concerning his being "the teacher of Israel" (verse 10). What follows in verses 11-21 is an expansion on Jesus's comments in verses 1-9, where he contrasted heavenly and earthly births. In verse 11, Jesus continues with the binary, explaining that Nicodemus' incomprehension comes from his rejection of "our" testimony and the inaccessibility of heaven for anyone other than "the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man" (verse 13). If you feel a bit like Nicodemus at this point, wondering what exactly Jesus is talking about, you are not alone! The "we" of verse 11 is a matter of much debate among scholars, but most think it includes Jesus and other witnesses who agree with him in the Gospel of John including John (the Baptist), Scripture (and its various figures and authors), and the Father. Jesus lays out all these witnesses in 5:31-47 during his next visit to Jerusalem.

The ascending and descending Son of Man in verse 13 leads straight into our passage beginning with verse 14. The close connection is more visible when we read without the break found in most English translations. In fact, when kept together, we can see the parallelism in Jesus' statements through verse 16:

*And no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended out of heaven,*

*the Son of Man,*

*and just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,*

*thusly it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up*

*so that everyone believing in him might have eternal life,*

*for thusly God loved the cosmos that he gave his Unique Son,*

*so that everyone believing in him might not perish but have eternal life.*

Read as a whole, these verses clearly align the Son of Man with God's Unique Son from John 1:17-18 and 1:51. Sent from God to the cosmos, Jesus' mission is to give life and light to the cosmos just as at the moment of creation when God uttered life through the Word (John 1:1-5; see also Genesis 1:1). In order to receive this gift, however, humanity must acknowledge its need by looking to Jesus.

This larger context also helps us understand the allusion to Numbers 21 in John 3:14. In Numbers 21, the Israelites grumble against God's wilderness provisions. To reveal their mistake, the Lord sends poisonous serpents, who bite and kill many Israelites. When they cry out to Moses for intercession, God's prescription is a mounted serpent set up in the camp. To experience healing, the Israelites must look to the serpent raised above them: that is, they must see the image of their sin and acknowledge their wrongdoing in order to accept God's gift of life.

Like this serpent, Jesus' mission to the world is one of revelation but, as in Numbers, his arrival is a mixture of rescue and punishment. As Jesus continues in John 3:19-21, he uses another image familiar in the Old Testament and the Gospel: light and darkness. Jesus is the "true Light" who came into the world (John 1:9-10); he is Light and Life, but his brightness can be blinding (see John 8:12; 9:39-41). Jesus displays this light first in conversations and later in confrontations with individuals and crowds in the Gospel. While some look upon him and receive his light, most turn away. As he explains in verse 19, "people loved darkness more than the light." Jesus is never surprised by people in John's Gospel, but he continually surprises, challenges, and confuses those who see him. They are dumbstruck by the presence of astounding Light in a regular human body (see John 2:20; 8:48-58).

Jesus' arrival, therefore, can lead one out of darkness and into light and life, or it can confirm one's place among the dead. God's motivation for sending Jesus is not condemnation, but love. God sends Jesus into the camp, and that trip culminates with Jesus' own exaltation upon a stake: a Roman cross. Lifted high, Jesus' pierced body demands attention as the narrator's gaze lingers on this scene in John 19:34-37. Just like the serpent in the wilderness, Jesus' body, the very location of God's glory (John 2:21-22), is the most staggering revelation of the gospel. Rather than actively judging, Jesus' form hangs, to be looked upon by those who dare face the horror of "the sin of the world" that caused the Lamb to die (John 1:29). Yet, rather than despair, this sight is also the place of life, the sign of God's profound love for creation. Thus, verse 21 ends with hope: "But the one who does the truth comes to the light so that their works might be shined upon, because they are being done by God." Jesus, the Light of the World, exposes truth all around him. That truth is not all beautiful; most of it is human mistakes, wickedness, and hatred prompted by selfishness and fear (verses 19-20).

But exposing these failures also means shining a light on God's unending love and work on our behalf. When we turn our eyes to the Light and accept our failings alongside God's love, we also see the cross where life is freely given.