

Numbers 21: 4-9 ;Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21; Ps 107: 1-3, 17-22 – March 11, 2018 Jervis

What Wondrous Love is This

John 3:16. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. I would be surprised if there is anyone in this room who doesn't know this verse. Until the recent demise of Christendom, this verse from John's gospel was ubiquitous. It was hard to miss. It was hard not to know.

The words of this verse were on billboards, on the sides of highways, on the sides of buildings, on placards at baseball games. I presume that the people who painted and who paint this verse in large letters for public consumption do so because they believe these words are true, and that as true words they can stand alone out there and change people's lives.

They are words from heaven and so they have the power to change people by being seen; by being in front of people's eyes.

These words are truth; and so they work even if they come out of nowhere for a brief second while whizzing along a highway or scanning a crowd. They are the great disembodied truth.

One of the leaders of the Jews, a Pharisee named Nicodemus, has come in the secrecy of night to find Jesus. He recognizes that Jesus is special – 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God because no one can do the miracles that you do unless God is with him.' Nicodemus has broken ranks with the Pharisees who distrust Rabbi Jesus, and so he has come in the darkness to connect with Jesus.

Jesus responds to Nicodemus by giving him more information than he probably expected. More information about who God is, about who Nicodemus can be and also about the presenting question – who he, Jesus is.

In a private nighttime conversation Jesus tells Nicodemus that it is possible and essential to be born from above – born from the place from which Jesus himself has come.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he, Jesus, has come down from heaven. And Jesus says that he, the one who has come down from heaven, he will be lifted up like the serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness.

Nicodemus, the scholar and committed Jew – the Pharisee – would have known that story about Moses. The story we heard today. The story about how the people of Israel had been walking in the wilderness for years after God rescued them from Egypt, and they were again complaining against God to Moses: ‘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’.

In response to their lack of gratitude for God’s provision for them, God sent poisonous serpents among them and many of the Israelites died. So the people came again to Moses and said ‘ We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.’

So Moses prayed and God said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole; and when a person is bitten, if they look at the serpent, they will live. So Moses did that and it worked – whenever a serpent bit anyone, if that person looked at the serpent of bronze on the pole, that person did not die but lived.

When Jesus says to Nicodemus that he is the one who has come down from heaven and that he is going to be the bronze serpent on the pole, Nicodemus must have started gasping for air. Not only because of how impossible that seemed – that this man that Nicodemus respected so much could possibly become the complex and paradoxical serpent who saved – but Nicodemus must have gasped because he would recognize the immense cost this would be for Jesus.

Jesus is saying about himself that he is going to be lifted up like the serpent who represented Israel’s deadly lack of trust in the God who had saved them from the Egyptians.

Nicodemus (and perhaps Jesus at this point in his life) probably did not know that this lifting up would be so literal – Jesus would be hoisted up after being nailed and roped to a horrific instrument of torture – a pole with a cross bar.

But Nicodemus would have known that what Jesus was saying about himself was beyond anything he would have expected to hear from this teacher and healer.

And then Jesus answers the question that Nicodemus was asking himself. Why would you do this, Jesus? Why would you allow yourself to even contemplate being lifted up like the bronze serpent on the pole that saved the complainers in the wilderness?

Why? Because, Jesus says, God loves the world so much that God gave me to the world. So that whoever sees me, whoever believes in me will not die but live. Live forever. I didn't come into the world to condemn it for its lack of trust in God, who has saved the world and Israel over and over again; I came into the world to save it, and more than that – abundantly more than that:

to offer the quality and quantity of life that God lives and that I live. Not just a bit more life, a few more days or months or years, like the bronze serpent on the pole offered. No, I came down from heaven and I will be lifted up so that everyone who believes in me can live eternal life – the life of God, my life.

“For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

These words come out of Jesus' mouth. They are embodied words, words that come out of Jesus' body and are about Jesus' body. They are words of flesh from the Word made flesh.

John does not describe Nicodemus' reaction. After this episode Nicodemus fades from the gospel story. Maybe Jesus gave him too much information to bear. And it is a lot of information.

Jesus has divulged the heart of God and Jesus' own heart. He is not speaking an impersonal truth – he is speaking intensely personally; about himself. God's only Son is the one who speaks these words about God's only Son. When Jesus says that God gave his only Son he is speaking about his part in God's love.

These words are Jesus' self disclosure of the deepest and more painful truth about himself. It is fitting that Jesus reveals the painful beauty of his truth to a respectful inquirer under the cover of night. For these words are so deep and so true that they need quiet and space and respect. They are Jesus' deepest truth; and he offers them to Nicodemus.

Of course, they are not only offered to Nicodemus. The author of John's gospel offers them also to everyone who reads or hears his story about the Word made flesh who dwelt among us full of grace and truth.

We readers of John's gospel may be tempted to whiz by these words when we get to them. As if they are on a highway billboard or a placard in a public space. We may have become disenchanted with these words because we know that they have been used poorly – to encourage individualism (God loves me) and to foster Christian superiority (because you don't believe you are damned, but I am saved).

But today we are asked to stop and pay attention to these words because we hear them from Jesus' mouth as he speaks about himself. Today we hear Jesus saying about himself that he is the one who enacts God's astonishing love for the world. A world that by all rights should be condemned.

A world that kills its children, that ignores the weak and helpless, that includes serial killers, that pollutes God beautiful creation. But God's love is greater than God's anger against humanity's rejection of God and godliness. God's love is so immense and superabundant that rather than condemning, God saves. Just like God always has. Like God delivered the Israelites from the Egyptians.

God's heart bleeds for God's creation, and so Jesus came down from life in the heart of God, to be lifted up so that the world could believe/could see the love of God. Because this is the only way for the world to be saved – through the love of the God who created it/who created us.

I believe John 3:16 has its full power when we hear it not as an impersonal disembodied proclamation, but when we hear these words coming from Jesus' body through Jesus' mouth. These words of truth are not detached truth words that have fallen down from heaven. They are from the mouth of Jesus, the man who came down from heaven. Enfleshed truth from the Word made flesh.

Jesus' words about himself, about the astounding love of God and about his own astounding love are words that bear continual hearing and praying with and meditating on. They are heard well when we hear them from Jesus – in the context of our prayers, in the context of our holy imaginings, of our being in the company of Jesus in our church community and as we see Jesus embodied in the bodies of others.

We are now deep into Lent, a time when the church directs us to self-examination, to reflection on the ways we fall short of who God created us to be and how God longs for us to act. We can have the courage to be real with ourselves about the ways we let others down, the ways we are complicit in the injustices and terrors of our time, because we know we are loved – we are loved by God and Jesus.

I do not think that apart from knowing ourselves to be loved so marvellously we can really go to those places in ourselves and in our community that need to be looked at and changed.

Jesus' words are words that tell us not just who he is and not just who God is, but who we are. We are loved. And we are loved not more nor less than every single human being.

Jesus came from heaven to be lifted up on the cross because God loves the world.

It is that last bit that is the hardest part to hear. And it is our deafness to Jesus' words that God so loved the world that is the source of the sins that we reflect on in Lent. Our deafness and blindness to Jesus' telling Nicodemus and us that he came down from life with God not just for the righteous people in Israel, not just for Israel itself, not just for you or not just for me; but for all. For the world.

The deeply personal truth that Jesus reveals to Nicodemus and that John's gospel reveals to those who hear it is that God is liberating/saving the world. Those of us who see this and believe – who believe that Jesus lifted up on that cruel cross and then raised by God from dark death – we who see this and believe are liberated to share in God's love for the world.

Ephesians puts this mystery in the words of poetry that we heard this morning. God's great love has made us alive together with Christ and raised us so that we are now with Christ Jesus in the heavenly places. We are now created in Christ Jesus for good works.

This conceptual mouthful seeks to help us know what our liberation/our salvation means. We, like Jesus, may live from the life of God for the sake of God's world.

One of the instructive things about the Lenten practice of self-examination is that it reveals to us what parts of God's world we would rather not love. Is it the arrogant and powerful? Is it the irritating and lazy? Is it someone we share a home or family or job with? Is it someone who sits a few pews away? And how can we begin to imagine loving the serial killer or the mass murderer?

The truth of John 3:16 is a profoundly and pointedly personal truth. It is Jesus' truth about himself and God that Jesus shares with us so that we can live lives of love. It is a truth that is best heard, like Nicodemus heard it, in deep and respectful quiet; hear it from Jesus: truth enfleshed.

It is a truth that has its true power not as a stand alone proclamation blasted out of heaven, but as coming from the heart of God and Jesus. A truth that draws us into the life of God and Jesus – eternal life; and that redraws us with the shape of love and of life.

The deeply personal and embodied truth Jesus reveals to Nicodemus about the almost unimaginable costly love that God and he have for the world can become the deeply personal and embodied truth of those who see it and believe it. Those who can look at Jesus lifted up on the cross and see love. Love not just for them but for the world.

After seeing this truth, may we not, like Nicodemus, slip past it back into the night. But may we be transformed by it; to help Jesus and God love the world.