

“What Wondrous Throne Is This?” based on John 3:14-21 and Numbers 21:4-9
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on March 10, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

When I was a kid, there was this guy who was always in the stands at major sporting events. [Choir held up signs] He wore a rainbow wig and held up these cardboard signs that read, “JOHN 3:16.” Now, probably quite a few of you remember seeing this man on your TV.

But if you don’t remember him, let’s just say it seemed he was everywhere. I remember at some point one of my older siblings asking me, “Hey, do you know what that sign means? What verse is it?” I was probably just 8 or 9, so I had no idea what the reference was specifically. We grabbed my mom’s old Douay Rheims bible, which is the Catholic King James Version, and found the verse.

Reading it was one of those “aha” moments, because we realized we knew the verse. We had heard it plenty of times. “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.”

In Christian culture, this is one of the most familiar verses, but as with anything familiar, it becomes background eventually. We assume we know it, or even that everybody knows it, and so, perhaps when you heard it this morning, and it was different, you cringed a little. That’s a good thing.

You see, this verse has been called the most popular one in the whole bible, and yet, as a verse singled out by famous Christian commentators it is almost unattested in ancient literature. It had been relatively obscure until the rise of Billy Graham and others, who in the mid-20th Century used it, with its contrasts of life and perishing and the simple call to believe, as a means of evangelizing. It was used for winning converts, or in most cases re-energizing believers. Know the perils – believe and you get everlasting life. If you do not believe, then you will perish. A simple carrot and stick approach to faith.

Yet, in reality, this verse comes in the middle of a long conversation between Jesus and the prominent Pharisee teacher Nicodemus. The teacher wants to know who Jesus really is and Jesus tells him. Jesus says many things, including that to recognize the Kingdom of God, you have to be born from above, or born again. This baffles Nicodemus who wonders how he can re-enter his mother’s womb. Jesus says the Holy Spirit is required for this re-birth, but what’s more, the Spirit blows where it wishes, without our knowing where it comes from, nor where it goes.

This is hard for Nicodemus, because by this regard, it would seem then, that you cannot choose to recognize God’s Kingdom – if the Spirit is deciding who sees and you depend on the Spirit which goes where it wishes. That’s where we find ourselves in the readings today, as Jesus makes reference, to a story found in the book of Numbers, a strange and difficult story.

The people are sick of the food that God has provided them. They are sick of the manna, the bread of life sustaining them, and presumably, they are sick of the quail too. They say their soul, their life, their whole being, (because remember in Judaism the soul and body are not disconnected), loathes and just utterly dislikes, the bread which God provides them.

You see they had just been attacked in their journey and they prayed to God for help. They defeated their attackers and made it so that they would not be attacked again, so perhaps the people grumbled because they saw no spoils of war. They defended themselves, but seem to have not taken provisions, since along the way it was God who provided food each day. What’s clear is the

people don't trust God anymore. They want to take matters into their own hands. They are impatient, or as the word literally means severed, cut apart.

They don't want food provided by God, earthly bread given by divine means. So in come serpents that are both earthly and divine. Why do I say this? Well, the word we translate as being either fiery or venomous, is also the name of a type of angel – the Seraph, flying serpents with six wings, as Isaiah describes. To say “serpent-like angel serpents” makes no sense, so one of the words has to be an adjective and we say “fiery” or “venomous.”

I don't know what to do with this story, except to note that if we domesticate God, and try to make God into our personal magician to affirm our every choice. We make God into someone to make true everything that we already believe and want to believe. Well, you know what will happen is that we're going to eventually find ourselves being bitten, by some provision of God that may challenge us in a new way. It is only by looking upon the cross that we remember what love truly looks like – the throne of our king. What a wondrous throne it is.

You see, Nicodemus seems to want God to fit into his own box – according to his teaching. And Jesus tells him he cannot recognize where God is unless he is born from above, and the only way to be born again is to be born of the Spirit, which cannot be controlled and goes where it wishes when it wishes. Nicodemus is like the people on the path along the Red Sea. But you know what? We are all like the people on the path along the Red Sea. We all want a God who affirms us exactly as we are and gives us what we want, agrees with us, even to the point that our God dislikes the people whom we dislike.

A Spirit that blows where it wishes means that it has the right to inspire, or literally fill with the Spirit, even people we don't like. It means it may challenge us in something we think is just a part of our identity, but which has become an idol we worship over God – as even all good things do. Family, country, lots of things that are good can become idols. The Spirit may change our opinion, convict us, and we don't like that. Nope. We do not. But look at the story. The fiery snakes changed the hearts of the people, and they turned back to God. Albeit this happened in a very strange way though, as Moses is commanded to make an image of a snake and raise it up for the people to look upon. This seems like worshiping a graven image, yet this is how God saves them.

Beloved, Jesus uses this image to address the strangeness of his own mission to save. Jesus tells Nicodemus that it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted high. This is the first of three references in John to being lifted high, and this one, is most closely tied to the cross. This is because the Jesus hanged on the Roman Cross resembles the copper snake hanged upon the letter Tau.

You see, it makes no sense that the throne of the Messiah, the anointed King of Israel, would reign on the very instrument that the Roman world has used to keep Israel occupied. The Roman cross was a psychological weapon inflicting not just death but shame, and it was this ultimate shame visited upon rebels and noncitizens – to be hanged naked on that cross. This shame kept rebellion and the subjugated nations in line quite well. And so, all in here, we have Jesus telling Nicodemus, that he is the one descended from heaven. He is human, but he is fully God and will be lifted up.

And so, in Jesus, the eternal Son, the only begotten God, the Word, fully one with God, has come into our flesh, to be one of us, to pitch his tent among humanity. And so, the eternal Son is given to the world, to be lifted high on the cross, having shared in our human life to then share in our human

death, so that by this, we who trust in him. Yes, we who believe, who have faith will not be destroyed by sin and death, but will rise like him to have life eternal. We will not be destroyed.

So then to trust is not to make an intellectual ascent. It is not to say I believe, so therefore that's all I need, I've punched my ticket to heaven and anything goes. No, to trust is to accept the bread of life that God has provided in God's Word made flesh. It is to look for the healing that God has provided in the Son of Man crucified for us. It is to embrace the hope that God has provided in the Messiah's resurrection. It is to accept the mission provided through the Ascended Son of God, through whom the Spirit has been sent to live in and among us, as we continue the work of reconciling all things in Him.

So, let me read John 3:16 again for you in the different translation, "For in this manner, God so loved the world, that he gave the Son, the only begotten, in order that everyone having trust in him might not be destroyed but might instead have eternal life." Beloved, notice what is not in there and then also think about what is implied by these words. There are two extremes we tend to go to after this verse.

There is a tendency in our faith to build parameters for who a "true Christian is." Like Nicodemus, we are afraid of a Spirit that blows where it wishes. And so, we ignore the following verse: "For God did not send the Son into the world in order that he might judge the world, but in order that the world might be saved on account of him. The one having trust in him is not judged."

We start adding things like – who ever believes in him and shares this political persuasion. Or whoever believes in him and believes in infant or adult baptism. Or whoever believes in him and believes that this or that is unforgivable. Or whoever believes in him and is also of one denomination or another. These are the ones we consider "the true Christians." We ignore that the Son did not come to judge but to save, and so we like to limit who we will count as saved.

Then the other extreme happens and there are those who recognize this next verse and embrace the world, but are put off by the idea that God might ask any of us to change who we are, to change or lay down something we value or cherish in our lives, even the good things that we consider a fundamental part of our identity. We want God to say, "I love you just the way you are," and this is true, but we don't want to hear the second part, that "God also desires to grow day by day, being transformed by God into something new." We are told to turn away from sin.

Remember Jesus said, "the one who has not trusted, has already been judged because they have not had trust in the name of the only begotten Son of God. This is the judgement now that the light has come into the world. Humankind loved the darkness, rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. For all who are practicing evil turn away from the light in order that their works might not be exposed."

To believe, to trust, is not to accept things just as they are, but to put everything in our lives and our world in the light. Most of all this allows us to stop judging ourselves because we are subject to the shame and honor of this world. We can stop judging ourselves and then stop judging others, and instead trust God.

Beloved, this is the balance we must strike. We cannot use John 3:16 to exclude others, adding that which isn't there, and we cannot use John 3:17 to say that we need not be changed. We must have

the humility to love one another as God loves us. We are to put ourselves into the light and recognize that in the manner God loved the world, we are called to be creators of the truth of God's love and grace, bringing all things into the light, in order that our works may be made visible because they have been performed in God." Amen.

John 3:14-21

[Jesus speaking to Nicodemus] said, "No one has gone up into heaven, if not the one having come down from heaven, the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted high the serpent in the wilderness, in the same way, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted high, in order that everyone having trust in him will possess life eternal.

"For in this manner, God so loved the world, that he gave the Son, the only begotten, in order that everyone having trust in him might not be destroyed but might instead have eternal life.

"For God did not send the Son into the world in order that he might judge the world, but in order that the world might be saved on account of him. The one having trust in him is not judged.

"But the one who has not trusted, has already been judged because they have not had trust in the name of the only begotten Son of God. This is the judgement now that the light has come into the world. Humankind loved the darkness, rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. For all who are practicing evil turn away from the light in order that their works might not be exposed. However, the one creating truth comes to the light, in order that their works may be made visible because they have been performed in God."

Numbers 21:4-9

The Israelites set out from Mount Horeb by the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom. The people became impatient within their whole beings on the way.

The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness for there is no bread and no water - our whole being loathes this lightweight bread."

So, the Lord sent among the people fiery serpents, and they bit the people. Many of the people of Israel died.

Then the people came to Moses and said, "We have gone off the path because we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord that the serpents are made to go away from us."

So, Moses prayed for the people. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make for yourself a fiery one and set it on a pole, and it shall become for everyone who is bitten that when they look at it, they shall live."

So, Moses made a copper serpent and put it on a pole. So it was that if a serpent had bitten someone, they were made to look upon the bronze serpent and they lived.