

**“God So Loved the World,” Lent 4, Mar. 11, 2018,
FPC Marshfield. The Rev. Dr. Janet E. Wolfe**

Texts: Num. 21:4-9, (Ps. 107:1-3,17-22, Eph. 2:1-10), John 3:14-21

John 3:16-17 are probably some of the best known verses in the New Testament. We have already heard them in the anthem, one of the best known musical settings, from 19th century British composer John Stainer in his “Crucifixion,” as well as the Gospel reading. You see it on billboards and banners. Most of us have memorized it. However, the popular interpretation of it is probably not where we want to go with it today. It is not about you, not about individuals, nor is it only about going to heaven after we die. It is about God’s love for the world as we find it now, full of contradictions and evil. It is about systems of government and empires that are often unjust, what theologian Walter Wink calls “domination systems.” Eternal life is not only about a life to come after death, but a life abundant in Jesus Christ right now.

We need to look at the context in which we find verses 16 and 17. First, it is set in the middle of the story of the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, had developed an interest in Jesus’ teachings, so he came to him by night, probably out of fear of what his colleagues would think. By the time the Gospel of John was written, probably in the late 1st century, there was considerable animosity between the followers of Jesus and other Jewish sects. Because the temple had been destroyed in the Jewish/Roman war of 70 C.E., the Pharisees had become the dominant sect. The Sadducees, temple leaders, had lost power when the temple and the sacrificial system no longer existed, and the Pharisees were leading a movement for emphasis on the Word, the law, the Torah, and worship in the synagogue. Actually, we need to keep this in mind as we read all the Gospels, because none of them were written before the Jewish war. The stories in the gospels of Jesus’ confrontation with Pharisees may not be accurate because of the changes that took place between Jesus’ lifetime and the time the Gospels were written.

In the earlier part of John 3, Jesus had told Nicodemus that he would not understand his teachings unless he was “born again from above.” This is probably a reference to baptism, when, as we go down into the waters, we die with Christ and, as we come up out of the waters, we are born again to new life. Many evangelicals use “born again” as a reference to some kind of conversion experience.

Our passage for today, beginning with v. 14, also refers to a common theme in the Gospel of John, light coming out of the darkness. One of the “I am” sayings about Jesus in John is, “I am the light of the world.” The Prologue, chapter 1, places Jesus, the Word of God, at the beginning of creation, as God was bringing light into darkness.

3:11f. talks about Jesus descending from heaven to be with human beings, with the world. John has a very high Christology. It is an exalted view of Jesus and his mission in the world. At no time, even during the crucifixion, is Jesus not fully in charge of what is happening. In this respect, John differs from the synoptic gospels, which put more emphasis on the suffering of Jesus as he faces crucifixion. Jesus is the one who descended from heaven who will also ascend to the cross and to God in his resurrection and ascension.

That leads us to v. 14, “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Our reading from the Old Testament from Numbers is the story from which that reference is taken. Throughout their wilderness journey, the Israelites were often unhappy, grumbling about

conditions even though they had been freed from slavery. They didn't like the food, they didn't have enough water; they encountered fires and poisonous snakes. Numbers suggests that God sent the fire and serpents to punish the Israelites for their grumbling. Moses prayed for the people, so God sent them healing. God instructed Moses to put a bronze replica of a snake on a pole. When the people were bitten, they could look up at the snake on the pole and find healing. Likewise in John, the people could look up at Jesus on the cross and find healing. Jesus replaced the snake on the cross.

Even today, the caedusus, the snake on a pole, is a symbol for the Hippocratic oath in medicine, a symbol of healing and of doing no harm. It was a symbol in Israel's temple called Nehushtan, from the cult of Asherah, which remained popular despite the priests' effort to eradicate it. Bronze snakes were also symbols of divinity in Egypt. As it relates to John's gospel, it is a symbol of God's grace and healing. When we look up to Jesus on the cross we are prepared for the deep healing that comes through the death of God's beloved.

It is important, I think, to consider that we are not talking here about substitutionary atonement. This theological doctrine, developed in the 11th century by St. Anselm, declared that Jesus had to die in order to appease God because of God's anger with humans for sin. I do not think that this is the kind of God we worship. We are talking here of a God of love, who offers us the grace of forgiveness. One of the issues that I struggle with in all these passages is the suggestion that God is angry and so seeks retribution.

Last summer, I attended the Washington Island Forum. The speaker was John Dominic Crossan. His lectures were built around his recent book, *How to Read the Bible and Still be A Christian*. The main question he raises in the book is how we deal with the passages, from Genesis through Revelation, that portray God as violent. Crossan has specialized in trying to discover what the historical Jesus was really like. He could not accept the substitutionary atonement theory. Jesus was crucified as a rebel and alleged "King of the Jews" by Roman power, supported by the temple leaders, who were threatened by Jesus' teachings. He did not die because God required it but because he offended the powers of the world. The resurrection is a sign that God vindicated Jesus in spite of the disapproval of the principalities and powers of the world.

V. 17-21 returns to the theme of light and darkness. People would rather be in the darkness because they do evil. But what Jesus taught is that those who seek justice, fairness, mercy and peace, who seek love for all human beings and for the whole creation, are the ones who live in the light. These are the ones who follow Jesus.

One of the suggested hymns for today is #2219 in Sing the Faith, "Goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death. Victory is ours, victory is ours, through him who loved us." It was taken from "An African Prayer Book" by Desmond Tutu, and set to music by John Bell. Tutu was a major part of the "truth and reconciliation commission" established in South Africa to bring peace among the different races as the apartheid system fell in that country and Nelson Mandela was elected president. May it be our prayer.