

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
March 20, 2011

The Gospel in Miniature
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:1-17

The most memorable verse in all of the New Testament may very well be John 3:16 – “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.” Just the abbreviated form “John 3:16” is “a staple of highway road signs and bumper stickers and football games.”¹ For many Christians, the gospel is summarized by the words of this verse. Martin Luther in fact called this verse the gospel in miniature.

As I’ve mentioned before, I’m mostly preaching from the Revised Common Lectionary this year. One big advantage of using the lectionary is that, instead of me choosing the text to preach on each week, the texts for each week have already been chosen for me. However, one disadvantage is that sometimes, it cuts off a section of a passage too soon. I believe that’s the case for this week. The lectionary has omitted the last four verses of this section (v. 18-21), perhaps misunderstanding them and thinking they were making a whole separate point about condemnation when in fact what those

¹ Anna Carter Florence, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, p. 69.

verses say fits within the context of this chapter about God's great and saving love for the world. So let me read those verses now and then we'll see how they fit with the rest of the passage. [READ 3:18-21]

If we take John 3:16 out of its context, we may make the mistake of understanding faith or "believing in Jesus" to be simply what one does with one's mind. Seen in the context of the whole section, John makes clear that "believing in Jesus is more than simply what one does with one's mind, but also about what one does with one's heart and one's life."² That's what it means to be born from above, to be born of water and Spirit. So let's take a closer look at this passage.

First of all, I want to point out, as an aside, there's a bit of interpretation we need to do in looking at this text. The original Greek doesn't contain any punctuation. It changes how we understand the text in subtle ways. So when we look at our famous John 3:16, where do the quotes begin and end? Is this an instance where Jesus is continuing with his thoughts, or is this John the Gospel writer commenting on Jesus' words? This is why we always need to be a little careful in reading red-letter versions of the Bible (where the red letters are supposedly the words of Jesus and the interpreter has made the decision for us on where the quotes are

² George Stroup, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, p. 72.

supposed to be). It's not always so clear. It's helpful to consider different ways of interpreting the texts, depending on where we put our punctuation.

How does this passage begin? It starts with a Pharisee named Nicodemus coming to see Jesus at night. Jesus says to him, "Amen, Amen, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." But Nicodemus misunderstands what Jesus is telling him.

That's not surprising. Fred Craddock notes that John often employs terms with double meanings (e.g., bread, light, water, temple, and other terms carry two meanings in this Gospel). Jesus says life in the kingdom comes by birth "from above" but Nicodemus translates "from above" as "again," and is confused (the Greek word *anothen* can be translated as "again," "anew," or "from above."). Nicodemus wonders: How can an old man be born again? In responding, notice that at v. 7, the "you" of Jesus' address becomes plural (see footnote p), indicating that at this point we're moving from a private conversation to Jesus addressing all of his followers.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that to be born from above is to be born of the Spirit, and to be born of the Spirit is to believe in Jesus and in believing in him to have eternal life. What does it mean to be born from above and to believe in Jesus? Just a few verses later, when we include the verses of this section that the lectionary left out, we see that "to be born from above by

water and the Spirit, to believe in Jesus, is to leave the darkness and to come into the light.”³ Again, it’s not enough simply to believe with our minds that Jesus is God’s Son; we also need to put our faith into action with our hearts and our lives. This action flows out of our faith, as grateful response to God’s grace. That’s what it means to leave the darkness and come into the light.

It’s kind of comforting that Nicodemus doesn’t understand Jesus at first, that Jesus even jokes with him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” Anna Carter Florence states:

“Nicodemus reminds us that even the best educated and most authoritative among us are still searching.”⁴

And then Jesus says some fascinating things, referring to an incident in Israel’s history when Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. To better understand what Jesus is talking about, we need to read our second passage for this morning: Numbers 21:4-9. [READ PASSAGE

The Children of Israel had fled Egypt to the accompaniment of mighty signs and wonders and had come to the borders of the Promised Land. But the people became impatient and spoke against God and against Moses.

³ George Stroup, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, p. 72.

⁴ Anna Carter Florence, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, p. 72.

And God's wrath lashed out against them. God sent snakes into the camps to kill his disloyal people. Then Moses prayed for the people. God told Moses to

make a brass snake, set it on a pole, and then tell everyone who had been bitten, "Look up! Look up and be saved! Look up! Look up and live!"

Author Phyllis Tickle says that "those who believed Moses, those who stopped looking down at the snakes, who stopped trying to pull them off of themselves and their children, but looked up instead at the brass snake...those men and women did not die, but they were saved. This does not mean that they were not bitten, but simply that those who looked up and not down did not die of their wounds."⁵

It's interesting that throughout history, people have tended to fear snakes. According to Barbara Brown Taylor, what God has Moses do is to make "a replica of the very thing the people fear...he takes the source of their anxiety out from under their feet and places it high up on a pole, where none of them can miss it. Snakes don't lead people into sin in this story. Snakes lead the people out of sin, by scaring them so badly that they leap back into the arms of life,"⁶ in other words, the arms of God.

⁵ ["A Serpent in the Desert."](#) Phyllis Tickle, *30 Good Minutes*, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, 2005.

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Snake Savior," Sermons from Duke Chapel, p. 352.

There's no doubt that this is a very weird story. Why does Jesus refer to it? Because Jesus knew that this story remained a powerful one for the people of Israel. So Jesus used the brass serpent as a figure for himself the night he was trying to explain the mysteries of heaven and earth to Nicodemus. He didn't succeed that night in getting Nicodemus to understand. But as Taylor notes, "that single reference may help explain why the early Church Fathers referred to Jesus not only as the Good Shepherd but also as the good serpent. The venom his killers feared turned out to be theirs and not his, but it took setting him on a pole in order to see that. Then God lifted him even higher so that venom turned to anti-venom and even those who had killed him were saved when they looked upon him."⁷ Like the brass serpent, on Good Friday Jesus was lifted up on a pole in order to give life to his people. God transformed symbols of death (the serpent's venom, the Roman cross) into symbols of life and hope.

The good news from both stories we've read this morning is that God has always offered his people life. As one commentator says, "There is no BC or AD on the love of God; John 3:16-17 announces what has always been true of God."⁸

⁷ Taylor, p. 353.

⁸ Craddock, p. 160.

John's Gospel tells us we can be saved: "saved from sin, saved from death, saved from meaninglessness and emptiness, saved from injustice, saved from ourselves."⁹ But how is this possible? Nicodemus came to Jesus with just this question, and Jesus told him that he must be born "from above." This is not humanly possible. It can only be made possible by God "who is above all our brokenness, all our sickness, all our sin, all our hopelessness. Re-birth is possible because it comes from above, not from human hands, but from God's hands."¹⁰

In the 1800s, some people attempted to build a bridge across Niagara Falls. Engineers were consulted. Money was raised. No stone was left unturned, but they could not get a cable across the Falls. They could not float it across the rapids. They could not shoot it far enough with a bow and arrow. They could not climb the steep cliffs and get it across that way.

Finally, a ten-year old boy made a ridiculous suggestion: Fly the cable across the gorge on a kite. How absurd! How foolish! Yet the red-faced engineers finally flew the cable across with a kite.

Like Nicodemus, there are times in our lives when we know we need to be born all over again, to be saved from our sin. At such times, it's

⁹ ["Salvation by Faith."](#) Rev. David Sapp, *Day 1*, 2011.

¹⁰ ["Salvation by Faith."](#) Rev. David Sapp, *Day 1*, 2011.

tempting to turn away, believing there's no way across the wide and deep chasm that separates us from God. If you ever come to such a moment, here is good news: You can be born from above!

As Rev. David Sapp states, "From above, you see, God sent his Son. He bridged the chasm. He spanned the tide. He opened the way. We are not hopeless! God has done what we could not. He has poured out his grace on us. He has covered us with his love. He has saved us by his grace. He has allowed us to be born all over again. If only we have ears to hear it. If only we have eyes to see it. If only we have grace to receive it."¹¹ Amen.

¹¹ ["Salvation by Faith."](#) Rev. David Sapp, *Day 1*, 2011.