

Michael J. Mathey
Lent IV
March 10, 2024
Text: John 3:14 – 21
Title: Nicodemus Part II

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. You may or may not know that each week's readings come from a pre-selected schedule of readings that are called pericopes, and each week's pericopes make up a collection of Bible readings that is called a "Lectionary." Here at Bethlehem and St. John we use what is called the 3-Year Lectionary which is newer, used by most congregations in our Synod, and which repeats most of the same readings every 3 years. Other congregations in our Synod use a 1-Year Lectionary which is older, and repeats the same readings every single year.

It doesn't happen very often in the 3-year rotation that we follow here, but on occasion one of the assigned texts for a Sunday will overlap with the assigned readings for a different Sunday from say the previous year. In other words, two different Sundays over the course of the 3-year rotation might have some of the same verses assigned to them. Today is one of those times. The Gospel text today includes John 3:14-17, and it was just last year that these same verses were used as part of the Gospel text on the Second Sunday of the Lenten season. It's almost as though we have a Lectionary re-run for today's Gospel text, but it's actually more of a case of a Lectionary continuation since last year looked at the first verses of John 3, and today's text looks more at the verses that come in the middle part of the chapter. It's almost like coming to end of the season of a TV show with a cliff hanger ending, and then having to wait until the show's next season months away to finally see what happens next.

Today's Gospel text continues the night-time conversation that Jesus has with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. He is there in secret to try and get a better handle on who this new Rabbi

named Jesus really is. Nicodemus seems to be the representative of a group of Jews who know that something special is happening, but they just aren't sure what it is. They've gotten numerous reports about Him and what He's been doing. They may even have heard some of His teachings in person, but they don't have the whole picture yet. They can't put Jesus and His Words into the proper context of what it all means. So far, they've only gotten bits and pieces, but can't put it all together. So, Nicodemus is there to get more information, and to figure out what this new Rabbi's ministry is all about. He's there to try and avoid taking Jesus and His Words out of context, and to try and give an honest assessment of His work to this point.

Taking Jesus and His Word out of context is something that we can all find ourselves doing far too easily and often. We do this all the time when we are looking at God's Word. It's so easy to take a verse or two out of context and end up missing the entire point of what God is trying to say in that section of His Word. Today I'm talking specifically about John 3:16. Most of us here know the words of that verse by heart, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Some of us may know it in a slightly different translation, but the message from our Lord is still the same. Because of His great love for the world that He created, God the Father sent His Son into it, and whoever believes in His Son will have eternal life. These words are the favorite of so many because they are a simple, straightforward statement of the Gospel. Not long ago, if you ever watched a professional sporting event on TV you would probably see someone in the crowd with the reference of John 3:16 printed on a poster board, but there were no words.

Without those words and the context that Jesus speaks them in, you're guaranteed to miss the rest of His point. As profound as John 3:16 is, Jesus says much more in this section of God's Word. When Jesus speaks the words of this famous verse to Nicodemus, He is in the middle of a

response that began with a criticism of the Pharisee being unable to understand the earthly things of which the Lord is speaking. Nicodemus is supposed to be a teacher of Israel, and yet he doesn't understand what Jesus is saying to him about being born of water and the Spirit. So Jesus is speaking to clarify His message to this religious leader.

As the reading picks up this late night conversation, Jesus is telling Nicodemus in verses 14 & 15, "...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." The bronze serpent which is described in our Old Testament lesson is a foreshadowing or a type of what was to come, Jesus lifted up on the cross. If the people looked to the serpent on the pole in the Old Testament, then they would be saved from the deadly bite of the snakes that God had sent into their camp to punish them for their complaints and lack of faith, and Jesus is telling Nicodemus that He too will be lifted up in order to save the Lord's people. And when we look to the cross today, there is no doubt that our eternal lives will be spared.

How and Why? Those are the questions that get asked so often when people hear this message from our Lord. He says that He died for us. He says that His death means that all sins can be forgiven when you and I look to His cross in faith. Yet many people all over the world hear this message of hope and promise in the Gospel, and they ask "Why me?" Or "How can this be possible? You don't know all of the things I've done. God can't possibly forgive me for the life that I've lived. I'm not worthy of Him or the sacrifice that He made. It can't be for me." This is essentially the same question that Nicodemus asked that prompted this explanation from Jesus in the first place, "How can these things be?"

It sounds strange at times, but there is something inside of us that just doesn't believe that forgiveness can be for us. God's Law works to show us our sin, and through what is most often

called our conscience, it gives us an innate sense of guilt over it. Without faith, that guilt can lead people to do desperate things in order to cope, such as turn to alcohol, drugs or other addictions. Through faith, we may recognize our sins and our need for forgiveness, but Satan works to convince us that it's just too good to be true. That's when our sinful nature, which doesn't want to admit any need to be forgiven in the first place, readily listens to Satan, and convinces us that we aren't worthy of God's forgiveness.

That's the dirtiest trick of all when it comes to the deceptions of the enemy. He looks for times when your faith is weak because of trials or temptations, and then he works to convince you that you're just not good enough to be forgiven. The worst part is that in a way he's telling you the truth. You're not worthy or good enough to be forgiven by God, and you do deserve to suffer the punishment that He demands for sin, the shedding of blood. And that's where Satan wants to leave you, wallowing in the guilt of your sins and failures under the Law.

But John 3:16 leads us to the rest of the story. First and foremost, it clearly answers the questions of "Why" and "How." Listen to those words again, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." The answer is obvious. He loves the world, and that love is demonstrated by His Son being lifted up on the cross. To believe in Him is to be given eternal life because of God's great love. His Son's arrival in the world was for the sole purpose of saving the world.

That's what Jesus continues to say in verse 17, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." There it is. That's the rest of the main point that Jesus is making after John 3:16. God sent His Son to save the world, and all it takes to

be a part of His saving work is to believe in Him. If there is no belief, then there is no salvation, but for those of us who believe in the Son of God and look to His work on the cross that salvation is certain, as certain as healing was for the Israelites who looked to the bronze snake.

Finally, Jesus tells us what happens to those of us who believe in Him as the Son of God. After we are given the gift of faith and our salvation is assured, He tells us that there is a judgment to be made. "...the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God." Someone who does not believe has no desire to be exposed. Their sinful nature which is still in control of the unbeliever clings to the darkness and loves it there. - God's Light is simply too much for them, and scares them because of what it will reveal, their sin and failure.

Believers are not afraid to have their works judged in the light of God's truth. We know that we are inadequate, but we also know that Jesus took care of all of that. And because of Jesus we know that our works of service for others – however imperfect they may be – are seen as fruits of the Holy Spirit. We know that what we do for others is a service to the Lord, and that He sees them through the perfect works of Christ. And finally, we know that even when our works fall far short of His expectations and become failing works of sin, He is willing to forgive us. Why? "Because God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son..." And that, my friends, is the best conclusion to any story you will ever hear. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.