

Michael J. Mathey  
Lent II A  
March 1, 2026  
Text: John 3:1 – 17  
Title: The Rest of the Story

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. It happened once again. The people of Israel just couldn't seem to help themselves. Each and every time they encountered a point of difficulty they complained against the Lord God. It didn't take very long for them to begin their complaints against Him, either. They weren't even across the Red Sea, and the people were already blaming Moses and God for trapping them with Pharaoh's army in pursuit. But God delivered them by opening up a path across the water on dry ground, and then drowning the pursuing troops behind them.

Not long after that, before they even got to Mt. Sinai, the people were complaining that they didn't have anything to eat, and already wanting to go back to their slave masters in Egypt so that they could be provided with food. They didn't trust in God to provide for them. But God delivered them from their hunger by sending manna to eat in the morning and quail to eat at night. As much food as they needed, God provided.

By the time they arrived at the border of the Promised Land, they should have been faithfully trusting in God to provide all that they needed, including the ability to conquer the Canaanites. But when the spies came back from scouting out the land that God had promised to them, all but 2 of them were convinced that it would be impossible to defeat the people who were already there. They complained against God and revolted with the intention of going back to Egypt. God stopped them, and as punishment forced the people to wander in the wilderness for 40 years until all of the adults who complained against God had died off. None of them would be allowed to enter the Promised Land except for the 2 spies who had faith that God would lead them and give them the victory over the Canaanites that He promised them.

Even after all of that – and a lot of other events as well, including an open rebellion that caused God to open the ground beneath the ringleaders and have it swallow them up – the Israelites are complaining against God... again! This time they had to take a longer than planned route to get to their destination, and the people are tired of it. They are complaining again about being in the wilderness, and they are worried again that there won't be enough food and water. To top it all off, they are complaining about the food that they do have, the manna and quail that God has continuously and faithfully provided for them. They have had it and so has God. To punish them, He sends poisonous snakes into the camp that kill anyone who gets bit.

It doesn't take long before the people come to their senses, and they go to Moses to ask God to remove the snakes. But God didn't remove the snakes. Instead, He instructed Moses to make a bronze snake, and to have it mounted on a pole for people to see. If anyone was bit by a snake, they had to go and look at the bronze snake to be cured. Once again, God tested His people to see if they would do as they were told. And once again, the people learned that God is as good as His Word, and that He would look after His people even as they continued to complain against Him.

Today's Gospel reading for the second Sunday of Lent directly talks about this bronze serpent as it describes the late-night visit that Jesus receives from a Pharisee named Nicodemus in John chapter 3. It's part of the rest of the conversation behind that most popular of verses, "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, and a number of years ago it was popular to put the reference of John 3:16 anywhere

and everywhere, especially where it could be seen on live TV broadcasts like at a professional sporting event. But the words were not there, and the reference of John 3:16 became part of a punchline instead of the Gospel message that it really is.

Without the words and the context that Jesus speaks them in, you're guaranteed to miss the point of it. As profound as John 3:16 is, Jesus says much more in this section of God's Word. Our Lord is addressing the Pharisee, Nicodemus, when he speaks these beautiful words in John 3:16 and it is happening during a secret meeting in the middle of the night. When Jesus speaks the words of this famous verse to Nicodemus, He is in the middle of a monologue that began with a criticism of Nicodemus being unable to understand the earthly things of which the Lord speaks. Nicodemus is supposed to be a teacher of Israel, but he doesn't understand what Jesus is saying to him about being born of water and the Spirit.

As the reading records this 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 serpent" that Jesus is talking about here is the one that I talked about just a few minutes ago. It's described in Numbers 21, and Jesus is telling Nicodemus that it was a foreshadowing or a type of what was still to come, that is Jesus being lifted up on the cross. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that He too will be lifted up in order to save the Lord's people. He is the rest of the story, 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." 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 overtime 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 he's telling you the truth. You're not worthy 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 your sins 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 and on into 18, "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 more of the story 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. We didn't read the verses today, but verses 19 – 21 tell us that after we are given the gift of faith and our salvation is assured, 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.

Believers are not afraid to have their works judged in the light of God's truth and grace. These are works of service to others that 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 works of sin He is willing to forgive us. Why? "Because God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son..." Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.