

March 14, 2021 - Lent 4B

“The Communion of Saints - The Community of the Quick and the Dead” -

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Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21 (Numbers 21:4-9)

Up until the 11th century, Scripture did not have verse and chapter numbers.

If people were memorizing scripture at all, they would memorize blocks of scripture, stories and narratives and themes, not individual verses, like we do.

If we thought about Scripture the way people did before the verse numbers showed up, we also would think in terms of narratives, themes, and stories.

But especially since the Reformation, this verse, John 3:16, is the core verse around which all theology and thinking revolve now.

This isn't wrong - it is an excellent sentiment and statement,

the “kernel of the entire faith”, as Luther called it.

But in breaking things down into number and verse,

we lose one of the most important aspects of reading Scripture - context.

I can guarantee that when you were in Sunday school, you did not memorize verse 14 in John 3. But once the context of the entire section is understood, we get a very different sense of what is being said in John 3:16 than what we learned those many years ago.

John 3:14-15 says,

*3:14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,*

*3:15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness...”

What is this referring to?

Well let's take a look at Numbers 21. This is a bizarre little story about snakes and serpents. Let me just read it for you:

*21:4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way.*

*21:5 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 food and no water, and we detest this miserable food."*

*21:6 Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.*

*21:7 The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people.*

*21:8 And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live."*

*21:9 So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.*

There are several times in the Book of Numbers where the people complain about their present state. They want to go back to Egypt.

Even though they were enslaved and treated poorly, at least they got a variety of food and fresh water. Here, in the desert, wandering with Moses, they get manna and the occasional quail. Water is scarce, and so is a regulated resource for the whole group.

Egypt has become a nostalgia, a sort of mirror image of the promised land flowing with milk and honey, in the minds of the people.

They have lifted up Egypt as some sort of comfort, as a balm against the suffering they feel they are experiencing now.

And so God sends poisonous, venomous serpents among the people.

Many die after they are bit.

The area of Palestine and Israel is home to more than 40 different kinds of snakes. One quarter of those snakes are venomous. This is why I have lived on the 45th parallel most of my life.

The most common venomous snake now is the Palestinian Viper, which accounts for most of the 150 bites that happen every year<sup>1</sup>.

This implies that the Lord somehow held off the snakes before this, and then, tired of the constant and unending complaints of the people of Israel, God lifts their hand of protection from the people, unleashing pit vipers among the people.

The people realize they need to repent and ask Moses to ask God to remove the serpents. The Lord tells Moses to make a pole and then make a serpent and wrap it around the pole, then raise it up and have the people look upon it, and the snakes will leave.

How weird is this?

This is the story that is referenced for the context of the most quoted verse in the Bible.

Bear with me, then, as we go on a bit of a journey through the symbols and deeper meanings surrounding John 3:16.

John 3:14-21 speaks to

who we were before we were brought to faith in Christ,  
who we are becoming in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit,  
and who God intends us to be in God's ever present and everlasting love.

John, the writer of the Gospel, has framed this discussion with Nicodemus (who Jesus is speaking to here) in terms of healing.

Moses raises the snake on the pole up to heal the people of the presence of the snakes and also from the burning bite of the snake as well.

And so, when you hear the word 'salvation' or 'saved' in the context of John 3:16, from here on out, hear the word 'healed'.

*3:17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved (HEALED) through him.*

But there is another level to this that should resonate for us.

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<sup>1</sup> Info about the snakes of the area of Palestine and Israel comes from this article: Abdel Fattah N Abd Rabou. The Mammalian, Reptilian and Amphibian Fauna of Al-Mawasi Ecosystem, South-Western Gaza Strip – Palestine. Agri Res& Tech: Open Access J. 2019; 23(1): 556233

A snake wrapped around a pole is also the symbol of the medical profession. It is a symbol that also goes back 2500 years to Asclepius, who was the mentor and figurehead of the guild of medicine in ancient Greece.

Actually, it is two snakes wrapped around a pole. But the image stands. Modern medicine symbolizes the power of what they do by...  
raising up a snake on a pole,  
so that whenever you look upon that symbol, you know healing is available to you in such a place.

This seems important now as we see glimmers of a possible end to this pandemic.

We have framed John 3:16 in the context now of Moses in the desert and in the context of healing. Hopefully, this already changes how you hear this verse. But let's go one step further.

Remember, I mentioned these readings are about who we were, who we are becoming, and who God wishes us to be?

The serpent is also a representation of who we were before we became a follower of Jesus.

This whole discussion begs a question, though. And that question is,

What are we being healed from?

If Jesus is raised up on the Cross in the same way the serpent was raised up by Moses, for the sake of healing,

then what are the serpents Jesus is healing us from?

So check this out.

The Bible uses the word snake and serpent interchangeably.

Sometimes, translators choose snake rather than serpent, and sometimes they use different words for them. One of the words that is used for venomous snakes, especially in Numbers 21, is "*fiery serpent*", or burning serpent.

Why?

Because snake venom burns when you get bit.

The word for fiery serpent in ancient Hebrew is "saraph".

The Greeks turned this word to "seraph".

When you speak of many 'fiery serpents', the word you would use for this is "seraphim".

If the word sounds familiar to you, it is because the "seraphim" are a class of creature which attends to the Lord on the throne.

Here is Isaiah's description from his vision:

*I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.*

*<sup>2</sup>Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. <sup>3</sup>And one called to another and said:*

*'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'*

*(Is 6:1-3).*

Fiery serpents swirl around the throne of God. How is that for an image for you?

But sometimes 'fiery serpents', or seraphs, can be in the service of evil things. Sometimes, seraphs are guardians of toxic ideas and thoughts.

These are sometimes called *'egregores'*, by the way.

When Moses lifts up the pole with the serpent on it in the desert, he is also lifting up all the things the people are complaining about.

When the people look upon the snake on the pole,  
they are looking at once at what they need to be healed from literally  
and also what they need to be healed from spiritually and relationally.

They need to be healed from what one of my professors called "the Back to Egypt serpent".

In order to be healed from the things that keep us from God,  
the things that keep us in darkness, as Jesus says today,  
we need to look upon those things and give them over to God  
and give them up in our lives.

Jesus says, "*The people loved darkness more than the light*".

To be healed from the past, from the desire for the dark things we love, we must look upon them directly, and repent, turn away from them.

We need to leave behind who we were.

And this changes how we think about the Cross.

Protestants and Catholics alike have a weird fixation on the Cross.

We sort of stop there and forget about the other places where the Bible talks about Jesus 'being lifted up', the same language as the pole with the snake in the desert. Jesus is also lifted up in the Transfiguration, in the Resurrection, and in the Ascension.

We are called to look upon each of these in the same way God calls the people to look upon the pole with the serpent in the desert.

What do we see when Jesus is lifted up on the Cross?

We see who we were. We see that Jesus has taken on all of what we were and then Jesus calls upon us to look at what we have been.

Who were we before Christ on the Cross?

We were people who loved power,  
people who loved to oppress,  
people who loved violence and suffering,  
people who hate love and community and peace.

The Cross holds up sin, brokenness, death, hate  
in order to heal us of sin, brokenness, death, and hate.

The Cross holds up the toxic, venomous, burning serpents  
that keep us from God, that keep us loving the darkness.

This is what we are being healed from  
whenever the Cross is lifted up before us.

This is what Jesus becomes for our sake.

In the medical world, this is called the principle of Like Heals Like.

It is the idea behind vaccines -

you are injected with a thing like the virus and when the virus rises up,  
it must confront the fact that you have already encountered its likeness in the world and so you are capable of resisting and defeating the virus.

Moses heals like with like in the desert.

The Cross heals like with like as well.

We must see what we have been in order to become who God wishes us to be.  
And so the Cross points us to the Resurrection, who we are becoming -  
we are people who are becoming more in relationship with Jesus,  
and then beyond to the Ascension, who we are meant to be -  
we are people who are meant to be in a  
participatory, winding, deep relationship with  
God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

You can hear this trajectory from who we were, to who we are becoming, and to who we are intended to be in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

He begins with who we were:

*2:1 You were dead through the trespasses and sins  
2:2 in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.*

It is as if he were saying,  
"You loved the burning, fiery serpents of this world and they were killing you."

Then he talks about who we are becoming:

*2:4 But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us  
2:5 even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved--  
2:6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,*

Paul uses the same language as God does with Moses and Jesus does with Nicodemus.

Even as Moses raises up a serpent on the pole,  
and Jesus is raised up on the Cross,  
we will be raised up as well.

Those who love darkness will see shame, suffering, reinforcement of the darkness they already have committed to.

This is why John 3:18 says 'they are condemned **already**'.

When the snake in the desert is raised up, and when Jesus is raised up, they only see the thing that has already committed them to darkness rather than the possibility of light.

And so it shall be with us.

Look upon the serpent on the pole in the desert and see yourself.

Look upon the Cross with Jesus and see your healing.

We are becoming the people who have been  
healed by God and Christ.

And then Paul talks about who God intends us to be:

*2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--*

*2:9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*

*2:10 For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*

When you hear 'good works' in this way, hear it in the context of everything we have just spoken of. Good works through the Lord are works designed to bring healing, and healing is salvation.

At no time in our lives of faith as a community, as a country, and as a world is this more true than right now.

We, the people who follow Christ from the Cross to the Resurrection to the Ascension, are being raised up to be healing for the world.

When we look upon the Cross, see who you have been.

Remember the Resurrection and the Ascension,

and seek the healing of others,

for this is who God intends us to be -

healers of the people like Moses,

and healers of all Creation like Jesus.

Amen.