

March 10, 2024
“Snakes and Poles and Idols, Oh My!”
Numbers 21:4-9 / John 3:14-21
Pastor Tim

You all have surely seen the signs at major televised sporting events.

John 3:16, as John just read for us: “For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

The sign-carrying practice entered popular culture in the 1970s, when born-again Christians saw it as an effective means of evangelism with the rise in nationally televised sporting events.

But the practice was primarily – and most famously – the work of a white guy by the name of Rollen Stewart – aka the “Rainbow Man” because of the multicolored Afro wigs he wore as he held up his John 3:16 signs.

He got his start during the 1977 NBA Finals, though then only with the rainbow-colored wig – dancing wildly for the cameras, just wanting to get on TV. But Stewart became a born-again Christian after the 1980 Super Bowl, and thereafter added the signs to his display.

It became his life’s mission. He traveled around the world – to the Olympics, the World Cup, football, baseball and basketball games, car races, golf tournaments, horse races and, get this, the wedding of Princess Charles and Lady Diana in 1981.

But by the 1990s his life had fallen apart. His wife left him, citing abuse. He was homeless, living in his car. And in 1992, he locked himself in a Los Angeles hotel room, held a maid hostage and threatened to shoot at airplanes at nearby LAX airport. He was arrested and, now in his 80s, is apparently still serving consecutive life terms in California.

If you can believe what you read on the internet, the mission of holding up John 3:16 at major sporting events ended with his arrest – for nearly two decades, UNTIL it was resurrected following the 2009 national championship game in college football.

Think Tim Tebow, the University of Florida’s uber Christian, uber intense quarterback who announced that for the game he was changing the message stenciled in the eye black

he wore from Philippians 4:13 ("I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.") to John 3:16.

A practice, for the record, that violated NCAA rules.

The internet lit up during and after the game with searches for John 3:16. Evangelism indeed, though there is of course no way to know what searchers did with their newfound knowledge. And now an unknown army of evangelical Christians keeps the mission alive.

Now why am I bothering to tell you all this? I mean, beyond the fact that it's included in our scripture readings this morning.

Because this verse, John 3:16, is arguably the most recognizable biblical expression of Christianity in the wider cultural context. Even Tebow said, when he made the change, that the verse "represents Christianity in a very good way."

"For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

It's safe to say that for most evangelical Christians, this verse is the heart of the gospel. The core of the Christian message and witness in the world. Believe and live, and as it goes on to suggest, don't believe and die.

God help us.

Putting aside the scholarly argument that much of what Jesus says in John's gospel is historically suspect because much of what Jesus says – including and perhaps especially about himself – is not found in any of the other gospels, what do we make of this verse?

Answering that question, or at least trying to, requires us to explore the broader text, and the broader biblical record.

One reason John 3:16 was and is so integral for evangelical Christians is that it's preceded by Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus, a Jewish leader named only in the gospel of John.

Jesus tells Nicodemus, "... no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Nicodemus questions and Jesus continues, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." Born again.

A few verses later in this exchange, we get to our gospel text this morning. And notably the reference to our other text from Numbers. John 3:14-15: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Humanity be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

What now? Moses and the serpent in the wilderness?

Our exploration takes us to the book of Numbers. You heard the story. The Israelites are continuing their already long wilderness journey with Moses, what will end up being 40 years.

In a familiar, oft-repeated refrain, the people start complaining. Freedom's great and all, but "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."

Previous suffering and complaining prompts God to produce well-known miracles like the manna and the quails, and water from the rock.

In this case, God has apparently had it with the complaining – with the lack of trust in God. Faith in the covenant. Warning: God does not come off particularly well in this story. But remember, it's a story. This is part of our exploration.

In response, God sends not manna and quails but poisonous serpents, snakes, among the people. And they bite. And many Israelites die.

If you think of God as a parent, this, for the record, is REALLY bad parenting. Parenting based on fear. You know, like, "Oh, I'll give you something to complain about!"

Suddenly being hungry and thirsty in the wilderness is the least of their problems. A distant memory.

As Carl Gregg writes, "It's kind of like treating a broken arm by smashing the patient's toe with a hammer. Your arm may not feel better, but you're too busy screaming about your toe to complain about your arm."

What's the divine message here? Scared straight? Perhaps just a little, or a lot of, perspective – as in, you know, it could be worse – it could ALWAYS be worse? Perhaps?

But the message seems to boil down to trust, faith. Even in the wilderness, learning to trust that the God of freedom and liberation, of Passover and Exodus, the parting of the Red Sea, is the One who freed and frees you from captivity. The One who always has your back. The One who desires abundance for all. The One whose Covenant with the people is defined by love above all else.

The packaging of that message in fear is theologically troubling, to say the least, but the message does get through because, in response to the snakes, the people at least acknowledge their lack of trust, faith. They confess and lament to Moses, asking him to pray to God to please, please, please make the snakes go away!

Which brings us back to Jesus' reference to this story. God tells Moses to "(m)ake a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." God, in the end, is the One who wants us to live, who longs for us to know life in all of its abundance.

Moses does what he's told, making a bronze serpent and putting it on a pole. And it works. The serpents don't go away, they don't stop biting, but the pole provides the antivenom. The cure.

Frankly, it is a bewildering story. Again, God does not come off well. Why send the snakes in the first place, and then why not get rid of them when the people acknowledge their lack of trust and faith – rather than provide a magic snake pole to cure people after they get bitten?

What's the message here?

For me, it's about fear. The Israelites' complaining was prompted by their fear of going hungry, thirsty – dying in the wilderness. A legitimate fear if ever there was one.

Truth is, the things we are most afraid of don't always go away. They are not always taken from us, especially in a world so dominated by both the literal life-and-death fears that we collectively reinforce, tolerate, in the form of injustice and inequity and violence, AND the manufactured fear of politics and culture and even religion that serves only to distract and divide us.

The things we are most afraid of don't always go away. They are not always taken from us. And so the journey of trust, of faith, then, in covenant with God and with each other, necessarily involves naming and confronting our fears. Naming and confronting that which keeps us from love – affirming God's unending, unconditional love for us, and recommitting ourselves to love like that – of God, and of each other as ourselves.

Perhaps the pole with the serpent placed upon it is simply a metaphor for facing our fears when they bite us, finding our healing by finding our way back to love – which, the biblical witness reminds us, casts out all fear.

Look and you will live. Because you will return to love.

Note that in the serpent-entwined pole, there is profound similarity and resonance with the so-called "Rod (or Staff) of Asclepius" from Greek mythology – wielded by the Greek deity associated with healing and medicine. That's where we get the familiar symbol for medicine and health care.

Look and you will find healing. Look and you will live.

So this is what Jesus references, according to the author of John's gospel, in saying that he, the Son of Humanity, must be lifted up "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness ... that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Look and you will live. Except, hold on a minute, it's not so simple. There's more to the story. Our exploration has to take us back to 2nd Kings, long after the Israelites' wilderness experience.

Hezekiah is the king of the southern kingdom of Judah. We're told that he "did what was right in the sight of God" – including that he "removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole."

Yes, THAT sacred pole! The bronze, snake-entwined pole that Moses had made so many years before had itself become an idol for the people. Like the golden calf. People made offerings to it.

Snakes and poles and idols, oh my!

Hezekiah broke the bronze serpent into pieces. Rather than a reminder of God and the covenant of love, a reminder to trust and turn to God and return to love for healing and life, it had become a poor substitute.

Idolatry is, after all, our search for life – for that which is life-giving – in all the wrong places. On all the wrong paths. Places and paths that do not, cannot, ultimately deliver on the promise of life abundant, life eternal. Only love can do that.

So back again, and finally, to John and Jesus and the snake pole. At a basic level, the similarity could simply be about the way to life. Look and you will live. Believe and you will have eternal life.

But this is where I think idolatry creeps in. In the trajectory of Christian history and tradition, especially early Christian history and tradition, belief became an exercise in intellectual assent rather than a lived expression of trust, faith.

It became about creeds, about orthodoxy and "right-believing" rather than trust and faith – which opens us to hope and ultimately to love – expressed in action, in life. Orthopraxy, "right-doing." Righteousness and justice.

"What does God require of you, the prophet Micah declares, "but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?"

John 3:16 suggests God SO loved the world – and understand here that the Greek word translated as SO means that God loved the world IN THIS WAY, rather than God really,

really, really loved the world. God so loved the world in that he sent Jesus, God's beloved Son.

If we believe in him, presumably, we are saved. And we live, in the light.

And if we don't, presumably, we aren't. And we die, in the darkness. God did not send Jesus to condemn the world, but apparently if we don't "believe" in Jesus, "in the name of the only Son of God," we are condemned already. At least according to the author of John's gospel.

That does not, for me, represent Christianity "in a very good way" – to borrow Tebow's words.

I'm very much down with lifting up the good news that God loves us, that we are all God's beloved.

I'm also very much down with lifting up Jesus as a way – not THE way – to know God, to know love and life made new and abundant.

But believing in him, for me, is not about believing certain things about him. It is about trusting that he, through his life and through his death, shows us the way to God, and so to love beyond fear. And so to life. Abundantly. Eternally, beginning in THIS life, the only one we know for sure.

In his poem, *How Good to Center Down!*, the great pastor, theologian and Christian mystic Howard Thurman writes,

*We look at ourselves in this waiting moment –
the kinds of people we are.
The questions persist: what are we doing with our lives? –
what are the motives that order our days?
What is the end of our doings?
Where are we trying to go?
Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused?
For what end do we make sacrifices?
Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?
What do I hate most in life and to what am I true?
Over and over the questions beat in upon the waiting moment.
As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence,
there is a sound of another kind –*

*A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.
It moves directly to the core of our being.
Our questions are answered,
Our spirits refreshed, and we move back into the traffic of our daily round
With the peace of the Eternal in our step.*

That's what I think of when I think of eternal life. It is a gift, not a reward. "Punishment" or "condemnation" are ultimately about missing out on the gift, not about some kind of eternal damnation in the fires of hell.

And so for me, John 3:16 and its popularity – including its presentation on signs at sporting events – as the summary creed of Christianity, has become an idol. And the god it claims an idol. The creedal notion that to believe in Jesus is to believe in and intellectually agree to certain things about Jesus, or claim Jesus as our Savior, or "be saved" or whatever language you want to use, IN ORDER to have life, to know life. And with it the uglier creed that to believe otherwise – even that Jesus is not the ONLY way to divinely inspired love and life – leads to condemnation and death.

A god who so loves the world in THAT way is not the God of Love. And it is not the God to whom Jesus spent his life and ministry pointing.

And so it's why I, like so many scholars, believe that these words from John attributed to Jesus are the author talking, not Jesus. We don't know for sure, but they don't jive with the Jesus I know.

Jesus wasn't a sign maker. He wasn't a sign holder. His life was his sign. And through his life and through his death and through the life he promises beyond even death, he made it clear that the summary verse of his spirituality, of his religious tradition, Judaism, AND what his would-be followers would later call Christianity, was this: "'You shall love the HOLY ONE your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

In Luke's account, as you may recall, a lawyer asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Prompted by Jesus to share what's written in the law, he recites these two

commandments. And Jesus tells him, simply and matter-of-factly: "You have given the right answer; do this, and YOU WILL LIVE."

Do this, and you will live. That's more like it.

If any of you are inclined to make a sign at home and take it, say, to a Sixers or Phillies game, or even your kid's soccer game, forget John 3:16. Try Matthew 22:37-40 instead. Or Mark 12:29-31. Or Luke 10:26-28.

But at the end of the day, the prophet Jeremiah reminds us that God doesn't care what's on our signs, but what's in our hearts: "For this is the covenant that I will make ... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

May it be so.