

Many people know John 3:16 by heart: "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."

A very familiar verse. But it doesn't stand in isolation. What's the larger context? What's the meaning?

Well, I could spend awhile talking about the beginning of John chapter 3 and a long conversation between Jesus and a Jewish rabbi named Nicodemus. But that longer reading happens two other times in our 3 year cycle of readings. I preached about that part of John a year ago on March 8.

Bottom line for us today. At this point in John's Gospel, Jesus is talking about a core part of the reason he has been sent by God. It is to make God known, and to bring people into a relationship with God.

And that brings us to our Gospel lesson for today. We begin with John 3:14.

In John 3:14, Jesus flashes back 1,200 years to an obscure Bible story from the book of Numbers.

The short version is this. There is a plague of poisonous serpents among the people. People get bitten, and some people die.

And God has a really weird prescription. God tells Moses, "Make a (bronze) serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live."¹

God doesn't get rid of the snakes. He gives the people a way to live in the midst of the snakes.

It seems a little too magical for my tastes: Look at a metal snake on a pole and be healed of your snakebite. Doesn't sound like the way God usually operates in scripture.

The best thing I can come up with is perhaps God is using looking at the metal snake as a way of showing trust in him. Perhaps God is saying, 'If people trust me enough to do something weird like that, I'll take that as a sign of their faith in me. If they look to the snake, I will heal them.'

And so, Moses makes a serpent of bronze, and puts it up on a pole; and whenever a serpent would bite someone, that person could look at the serpent of bronze and live.

That's kind of a weird little story. It would probably be footnoted as an obscure minor story in the OT if it wasn't for one thing:

Jesus uses this story to make a heavy theological point about himself. Jesus uses the bronze serpent as the run-up to the famous verse, John 3:16.

¹ Numbers 21:8

So back to our Gospel lesson, and John 3:14.

Jesus tells his conversation partner, rabbi Nicodemus this: Jesus says "Just 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."

Jesus' message is this. 'Just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent on a pole, I'm going to be lifted up, I'm going to be hung on a pole, I'm going to be hung on a cross. And like that serpent, anyone who looks to me will be saved. Whoever looks to me, whoever believes in me, will have eternal life.'

Why? The answer is Love. We say, "God is Love." That's true, but that's not nearly complete enough. That brings us to the famous verse 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."

John 3:16 is more than just saying, "God is Love." It's saying, God loved all of us, God loved the world so much that he did something incredible for us. He gave us his son. "God so loved... that he GAVE!"

God gave Jesus to be lifted up and to die on our behalf, so that we might look to him and be saved, so that all who believe in him might have eternal life.

The Son will be lifted high upon the cross. This is the way God shows his love to the world.

God sends his Son to us, so that we might be saved, so that we might be healed, so that we might be made whole, so that we might be brought into God's Kingdom, so that we might experience new life in the here and now. This is the good news John wants us to hear.

And it is echoed in John 3:17, a verse which should be just as important as 3:16. John 3:17 says, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

The Son lifted up on the cross—he is the source of salvation—he is God's love made visible.

In 2 weeks we begin Holy Week, that week of the year when we remember and celebrate Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. And today, John is reminding us that the cross of Jesus is the source of life and healing for us all. And it is the sign of God's love for us all.

The Son has been lifted up on the cross on our behalf.
Look to him. Believe in him. Find life in him.