

Numbers 4 + John 3:14-21

What wondrous love

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What verse is more well known than John 3:16? Those who grew up in the church often memorize it in Sunday School; others find it so compelling that they hold up John 3:16 posters at televised events, sure that someone will know what they are referring to and quickly turn to his or her Bible - which, of course, is nearby - for salvation. You can find John 3:16 emblazoned almost anywhere. But, as with any well-known passage, it is so well known that it's often not really known at all. That's especially true with the larger context of John 3:16.

I'm guessing not so many folks know about the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness. What's the back-story here and why on earth would John talk about it as a set up to his proclamation of the gospel? Well, to begin with God is pretty dang weary with the ungrateful Israelites whom he is bringing from slavery to freedom, with the help of his equally weary servant Moses. To show God's disfavor, he sends a plague of snakes to chastise them. It worked; but I'm not recommending it for parents! The people repent and the Lord commands Moses to hold up the bronze serpent so that whenever one is bitten by a poisonous snake, she or he can look upon the serpent and be healed. It's a strange but powerful story of healing.

And, for John it's a perfect ***type of story*** to talk about the cross of Jesus.

Those venomous snakes in the wilderness are the consequence of sin - life without God - and the bronze serpent the symbol of effective healing. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so will Jesus be lifted up for the ***healing*** of a world dying of poison. ***To put it differently, the cross of Jesus heals the wounds of those bitten by serpentine forces, who now look to him for life.***

You don't have to look far for the consequences of life without God among us. Poison abounds. It would bore you to name all the instances of sin: from deception and vanity to corruption and racism, from violence and abuse to much, much more.

So, rather than focus on the consequences of sin just now, of which we are well aware, it's more important is to focus our eyes on Jesus lifted high upon a cross, not for the punishment of the world, but for *healing* and liberation from sin. Here we see Jesus high and lifted up, for all to see the radiant, glorious revelation of God's love for the world gone astray. John's gospel is full of signs: water into wine, a woman drinking at the well, Lazarus rising up from the dead, the blind man seeing.

This is God's ultimate sign of salvation - Jesus lifted up for all to see God's love for a wounded world. St. Paul echoes John: *The proof of God's amazing love is this: even while*

we were dead in our sin, Christ Jesus died for us that we might be raised to new life in him.

The other day I received a notice about a conference for writers and preachers. What caught me attention was the theme: *Reading the Verbs: Finding the Script in Scripture*. That may sound a bit nerdy. The notice said: *"what's true in life is also true in scripture: the verbs dominate. What happens when we read scripture and let the words lead?"*

I took that as an invitation to let the verbs lead in our passage.

God so **LOVED** the world, that he **GAVE** his only begotten Son, that whosoever **BELIEVES** in him may have life eternal. God did not **SEND** the Son into the world to **CONDEMN** the world but that the whole world might be **SAVED** in him.

We'll get to the judgment part in a moment. For now, let's focus on these verbs. God **loves** the world - those lost in sin, estranged, vulnerable in a spiritual wasteland. **Love** is the verb that leads everything in God. It is the reason for that other verb: God **gave** the world Jesus. **Jesus is pure gift, given in love**. And this is the Good News that set up the next verb, whosoever **believes** in him will have life eternal.

Henri Nouwen says about all this:

God sent Jesus to make free persons of us. He has chosen compassion as the way to freedom for us. Jesus is the revelation of God's unending, unconditional love for us human beings. Everything that Jesus has done, said, and undergone is meant to show us that the love we most long for is given to us by God, not because we deserved it, but because God is a God of love.

But, tragically, this revelation of God's love unveils the familiar darkness of humanity and the continuing refusal to receive what God desires to give in the crucified Jesus. In fact, this is the judgment of the world that it loves darkness rather than light. The critical verb here - **believe** - implies the critical decision that rests upon all of us. Those who cannot bring themselves to believe that God brings healing and not punishment are indeed lost; self-deceived, caught in a web of sin, confused, grasping for life in all the wrong places, in all the wrong ways. Those who persist in crucifying love by their treatment of the most vulnerable have chosen darkness rather than light.

The refusal to admit our own wounded, vulnerable self and the deep need for God's unbounded mercy - this is the judgment that the cross of Jesus reveals.

This condemnation is not an act of God toward the world. The condemnation is a revelation of the persistent darkness. The Love of God in the cross of Jesus lifted up

presents us with a critical decision. We know snakes that abound; indeed, they are everywhere. Jesus is lifted up for all the world to see.

A decisive moment is upon us. Will you embrace this love that God has for you, and walk in this way?