

# BEHOLD LOVE

John 3:1-17

Second Sunday in Lent (Series A)

March 5, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 3, verses 1 through 17. This is what we might call a “super passage.” There are a number of very significant verses in this passage that we might read and think, *I had no idea all of that was in one passage*. It, of course, has John 3:16 in it. It also has Jesus’ teaching on how to be born again, which turns out to be about Baptism. But perhaps the best part is a less familiar section in between them. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 3, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus’ name.

<sup>1</sup> Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ <sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> 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.”

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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I want you to think about something, and, if you can, paint a mental picture. What does love look like? That’s what I want you to think about. Picture it in your mind. Search your brain for an image that defines love. Now, what does it look like?

If you watch a lot of Hallmark movies, it might be a cute girl in a fuzzy winter coat and a handsome guy in a flannel shirt and snowflakes the size of cotton balls falling from the sky. I don’t have anything against Hallmark movies, but that’s not quite the image we’re looking for.

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Or your image could be a mother holding a newborn child. That's certainly in the right direction. But since you're sitting in a church, and there's a big cross straight in front of you, you might have guessed this is going somewhere else.

Someone once said, "Love is beautiful." I actually have no idea who said that. I'm just assuming somebody has, probably many people. And it's true; love is beautiful. But that does not mean it's cute, or pretty, or attractive in any sense of the word. Love might be the ugliest sight you have ever beheld. It might be something from which we shield our eyes. I just finished reading *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* to my kids. And I might spoil something here, so if you haven't read it yet, feel free to plug your ears and count to twenty. Susan and Lucy follow Aslan from a distance as he walks to the stone table alone to let the White Witch kill him. He did this in exchange for their brother Edmund. And the two girls watch most of it in horror and sadness. But when the witch raises her knife to slay the great lion, they can't watch. They look away. It's the greatest display of love they would ever see, but they can't look at it. It's too ugly. It's the most beautiful thing they have ever witnessed, and it's the ugliest.

The same thing is true in our world. The most beautiful thing ever is also the ugliest.

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In the middle section of this super passage, Jesus says to Nicodemus, "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" (3:14-15). And that most familiar verse follows, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (3:16).

The part about Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness paints the picture of what John 3:16 is talking about. When it says, "For God so loved the world," the word "so" does not mean, "God loved the world *so much* that he gave his only Son." Although, that would also make sense. But in the original language (when used as an adverb) this word (οὕτως) means "so" in the sense of, "in this manner." So it's not talking about the extent to which God loved the world, but it's talking about the specific way in which God loved the world. The way in which God loved the world is similar to what Moses did in the wilderness when he lifted up a serpent.

Now, what in the world am I talking about? The episode of Moses lifting up a serpent in the wilderness is one of the strangest stories in the Bible. Or, at least, it was until Jesus spoke these words in John 3. But for over 1400 years, I suppose the Jews just looked at this passage and thought, *What was that all about?* because, for many reasons, it just doesn't make any sense, not without Jesus' explanation 1400 years later.

So what happened? To find out, we're going to hop in our Way Back Old Testament Machine, and we're going to set it for Numbers 21. This should drop us off in the land of Edom in around 1407 BC. Edom was somewhere between Egypt and Israel ... if you take the long way. The Israelites were about thirty-nine years into their forty-year journey in the wilderness. It's almost over, but they're having a bit of an "Are we there yet?" moment. If you have kids, or if you have ever been a kid, you know what I'm talking about.

They got sick of the food God was giving them, so they grumbled against God and against Moses. They complained that they had no food or water. The water thing might have been true, at least for a short time. Occasionally they would come to a place with no water, but God would cause water to come out of rocks for them (e.g., Ex. 17:1-7; Num. 20:2-13). We know the lack of food thing wasn't true. God gave them manna six days a week. Manna was a sweet, wafer-like bread that just appeared on the ground in the morning. We also know it from their own words. Listen carefully to what they said, and see if you can spot the problem. They said, "There is no

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food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food” (Num. 21:5). Did you catch that? They admitted there was food; they just didn’t want it anymore. It’s kind of like when your mom packs a cooler full of ham sandwiches for a trip. But at some point, you want something else. You already had one for second breakfast, another one for elevensies, a third one for lunch, and you just want something else for your afternoon snack. The Israelites were getting tired of eating the same thing every day. So they grumbled against God.

And God sent a plague of snakes to discipline them. The Bible calls them “fiery serpents.” They may have been fiery in the sense that they looked fiery, like with red and yellow skin. But most likely, their bite felt fiery. And many of the people died (Num. 21:6).

So the people confessed their sin and prayed that God would take the serpents away. That’s a good response. And God answered their prayer, but not exactly how they asked him to. Instead of taking the serpents away, he gave them a cure. And the cure was really weird. God said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live” (Num. 21:8-9).

Now this is weird in at least three ways. First, this is not the typical way to treat snakebite. If you get bitten by a snake, and your doctor says, “Here, look at this statue of a snake,” you should find another doctor, and fast.

Second, this seems to be a violation of the first commandment. The latter part of the First Commandment includes this instruction: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image” (Ex. 20:4). But now God tells Moses to make this carved image, and the people are supposed to look to it for healing. That seems like a violation of the First Commandment. It’s not a violation simply to make a carving or a statue of something. But if you make a carving of something, and then you look to it for salvation or divine healing, that is an act of worship, and that is a violation of the First Commandment. So it’s really weird that God would command his people to do this.

Third, and this is the one that makes it really, really weird: it’s a snake. Now, I admitted last Sunday that I really don’t like snakes. I’m even kind of afraid of them. Maybe that makes me seem less manly. But someone reminded me that Indiana Jones was also afraid of snakes, and that made me feel better. And a lot of people are afraid of snakes. There’s just something disturbing about them. It goes back to the fall into sin, where the devil took the form of a serpent, and God cursed the serpent, saying that he would slither on his belly (Gen. 3:14). At that moment, it seems that God changed snakes to make them creepy, both literally and figuratively. So the snake is the image of the devil. You should never look to an animal statue for salvation. And you should especially not use one that represents the devil. So this thing about looking to a snake statue for healing is just bizarre.

And I don’t think we would know what to make of this if Jesus didn’t bring it up again in John 3. When Jesus makes this comparison, I think it gets even weirder, at least for a moment. But if we hang with it to the end, it makes beautiful sense.

Like that snake set on a pole, Jesus would also be set on a pole and lifted up. This is a reference to the cross, where Jesus was literally lifted up on a pole. And everyone who looks to him on the cross and believes in him will have eternal life (6:40).

But still, why a snake? The reason for the snake is that Jesus became a curse for us. Galatians 3:13 says, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.’ ” The serpent is the image of the curse in Genesis 3, and that is exactly why Jesus accepts that image for himself. He became the curse in order to redeem us from the curse.

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So in Numbers 21, when the people looked to the image of a serpent on a pole, that was a prophetic picture of Jesus. I seriously doubt any of them understood the meaning, but it was there, and we can see it now that we know what happened to Jesus. The curse was set on a pole for our salvation. Jesus accepts the curse for our sake. That means that he accepts our sin as his own, and he accepts the condemnation that sin deserves. So we look to a cursed man, filled with sin, dead on a cross for our salvation. That is what Jesus became for us.

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So this is what John 3:16 is talking about when it says, **“For in this manner God loved the world.”** God gave his Son to bear our sin and become a curse for us, so that everyone who looks to him in faith will not perish, but have eternal life.

You and I are like those Israelites, snake-bitten because of our sin. We are dying. But God loved us by providing a serpent in our place, so that we might look to him in faith and live.

This is what love looks like. This is God’s perfect love. Snakes are ugly creatures. They smell bad too. It’s like the stench of death is always on them. But this is the picture of God’s love. It’s not pretty, cute, or attractive in any sense of the Word. It’s as ugly as sin, literally. The actual cross on which Jesus died is much uglier than a snake on a pole. Imagine if someone walked in here with a snake nailed to a pole, and not just a statue of one, but what if someone took a real snake, nailed it to a stick, and waved it in front of your face. Would you look at it? That would be really ugly. But that is not nearly as ugly as the actual sight of the cross. There we have Jesus, with his back ripped open, a crown of thorns on his head, he’s bleeding from at least six different places. He’s in anguish. He’s dying. People are mocking him. This is the sort of thing we hide our eyes from (Is. 53:3).

But our eyes can’t even see the ugliest part. In that hideous flesh, God laid the sin of the entire world. And that, of course, means yours. That’s why the exterior is so ugly. It’s a little glimpse into the ugliness inside. Jesus became the curse, inside and out. It is so unbelievably ugly ... and, at the same time, beautiful. Because this is love. He was ugly for you.

Behold love. Do not shield your eyes from Jesus. He invites us to imagine the sight of the cross. Picture it in your mind. Take it all in. Smell the blood. Feel the cool, dense humidity of darkness in the middle of the day. Hear him cry, **“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”** (Matt. 27:46) and, **“Into your hands I commit my spirit!”** (Luke 23:46). Feel the fading warmth of his final breath, and see his chest rise no more.

Behold love, ugly and beautiful, for this is your salvation. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.