

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday March 11, 2018 Lent 4B
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Text: John3: 14-21
Theme: For God so loved

The Gospel lesson today picks up in the middle of a conversation between Jesus and one of the Pharisees named Nicodemus. The scriptures portray Nicodemus as a curious and thoughtful religious man. He really cares about the spiritual life and is a seeker after truth. He comes to Jesus under cover of darkness to have a real conversation with this strangely attractive spiritual teacher, Jesus of Nazareth. Why does he come at night? Well, we are led to believe that he is afraid of what his colleagues will think of him. He is fraternizing with the enemy, and he wants to avoid their watchful eyes. He desires spiritual insight, and he is willing to take risks to obtain it. This in itself is a spiritual lesson. Do we desire God enough to put ourselves out to grow spiritually? Perhaps God finds our desires not too strong but too weak.

The story we are given in this gospel is admittedly strange, as most spiritual teaching is. Jesus references a strange tale from the book of Numbers. After the Israelites escaped Egypt, they wandered in the desert and complained bitterly to God. As the story goes, God, fed up with all their complaining, sent serpents into the Israelites' camp. The serpents bit the complaining people, and they died. This story might be helpful if you are tired of complaining teenagers at home or as a kind of comic vision for what could happen to some of your extended family members or meddling neighbors who have perfected their complaining into a nearly spiritual art-form. But I digress.

God told Moses to make a bronze serpent, a snake sculpture, to mount it on a pole and raise it up in the camp. If the people who had been bitten by the snakes simply looked at the bronze serpent, they would be cured of their snake bite (Numbers 21:1-9). Admittedly it is a strange story where snakes are both the enemy and the cure. If you want to get well, "Look at the snake." If you get bit by your complaining ways, "Look at the serpent on a pole." One commentator playfully points out that it is a kind of homeopathic cure or medicine. What brings the disease in one form, cures the disease in another form.

This is interesting in its own right, a strange and numinous homeopathic story from the Jewish history of liberation. But then Jesus makes some fairly fancy moves with this story and his own sense of mission. Jesus likens himself to the snake on the pole. He tells us that the Son of Man must also be lifted up and that those who look to him will find life.

Humans are bitten by death, that is a fact. The Son of Man, the one who comes down from heaven, becomes death, death on the cross. In the cruel punishment of Rome,

Jesus is lifted up on a cross so that others can see him. We are asked to look at Jesus, lifted up on the cross, and believe that what we see there is God's saving presence, God's unquenchable love flowing out into the world that God loves. If we look at Jesus, the crucified one, we will find life instead of death, life that keeps on going and going.

It is strange, isn't it, that Jesus gives us these two stories to tell us about God's love. Look at the snake! And look at the crucified One!

When we look at Jesus lifted up what are we supposed to see? What are we supposed to see in this crucified Jew from Nazareth undone by the death-dealing powers of humanity? We are supposed to see something mystical and beautiful. We are to look there and see how divine life has entered into human life precisely at that point where human life is failing -death- and at that point sustains the human person through the loss of temporal life. In Jesus, life, the life of God that is not used up, fills and transcends temporal life, and that life is discovered by looking upon the crucified one. In one form, death bring the loss of life that we all know; in another form, the crucifixion of the Son of Man- death - brings new life, the fullness of life to us all. This is a deep mystery. It is not known by our reason alone. It is not proved by some formula of salvation. It is known by the heart, sensed by the hungry soul, felt in the depths of our humanity, known by the spiritual faculties that it awakens to love and life and longing. The cross, the brutal symbol of death, becomes by God's power and by grace a symbol of new life. A shameful instrument of death becomes a tree of life.

On the cross, the message of God is writ large. God so loved the world... God so loved the world, not just little pieces of it, not just certain people within it, not just the spiritual people. God loves it all, everything he has made: the wild blue fin tuna being chased to extinction, the elk bugling in the meadows of the Valles Caldera, the peach tree blooming 25 days early in your backyard, the blooming meadows of the Truchas, the child raising her hand in math class with the right answer dancing in her head, the Muslim girl hoping that the school in Kabul will reopen soon for she so loves her teacher and reading, the soccer player running strong for 90 minutes, the surgeon opening up bodies to bring new life, the scientist looking for a cure to MS, the manager wanting to help her employees grow and succeed, the hungry refugee looking on the horizon for the dust of the aid trucks, the football fan holding up the bible verse hoping to save people and distract the kicker, the elderly woman lying in her bed enjoying the morning sun streaming through the window, the muddy red river winding its way to the Rio Grande. For God so loved the world, yes all of it, all that has been and is and will be, the ancient forests, the barren deserts and the people hurrying along the metropolitan streets and disappearing into the trains below.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

The cross points us to this deep truth at the center of everything: that God loves all. God is the hidden being behind it all. Far more than just a verse used to convince people to get saved, this verse opens us up to a deep revelation: that we as human beings are held in life, grounded and sustained by the ultimate Mystery that we neither can fully comprehend nor control. We are held in being by the Mystery of God. This mystery we can approach, struggle to appreciate, and finally submit ourselves to the beauty of this truth beyond our comprehension. But there is something else in all of this revelation that we can scarcely take in. It blows our minds as our feeble spiritual lives try to wrap themselves around the insight. The essence of the Mystery that is the ground of our being is self-giving love, a love so wild and so prodigal that it is completely dedicated to human fulfillment. It is a love so wonderful and beyond our knowing, as the Exultet sung at the Great Vigil of Easter proclaims.

How wonderful and beyond our knowing, O God, is your mercy and loving-kindness to us, that to redeem a slave, you gave a Son.

How holy is this night, when wickedness is put to flight, and sin is washed away? It restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to those who mourn. It casts out pride and hatred, and brings peace and concord.

How blessed is this night, when earth and heaven are joined and we are reconciled to God?

This amazing piece of scripture that has been quoted ad nauseum by Bible-thumping fundamentalists and held up in football end-zones and spray painted on the tailgates of rusted-out pickup trucks is a message so beautiful, so profound, so lovely, so beyond us that none of the attempts to trivialize it can ever undo the wonder of this message. The Son of Man was sent into the world, our world, by this love. Divine Love could not stomach the sight of human depravity and dying. Divine Love could not allow the sorry human condition to have no escape. So Divine Love dared to enter our humanity.

You might remember the lyrics from a song by They Might Be Giants that describes the human condition in not so flattering of terms.

Person man, person man
Hit on the head with a frying pan
Lives his life in a garbage can
Person man

Is he depressed or is he a mess?
Does he feel totally worthless?
Who came up with person man?
Degraded man, person man

Divine Love desires to fill humans with life that does not end. "How can this be?", we say. Are we worth this ongoing crazy love of God? Even though people in our world have strayed from their creator, denied their grounding in the divine, and oppressed and hurt one another in so many atrocious ways, God is not looking for condemnation. The desire of God, the desire of the Mystery behind it all, is for salvation, for returning and rest. The Gospel writer proclaims that the judgment of God is love and life in abundance and without restraint.

In the middle of Lent, this is the news: God loves without measure. Even a flawed and distorted humanity is worthy of God's own presence invading creation, for love's sake. In the middle of Lent, whether you've really managed to give up chocolate or stop drinking too much good beer or whether your new spiritual discipline is wooing you into spiritual places you've wanted to go or if you're making scant progress in learning to meditate; no matter how your Lent is going, God so loved...

God so loved the world.

God so loved you, (fill in the blank).

I wonder if we can do that. Can we believe it, can we look at the cross, can we look at this icon of the crucifixion and see our name on it?

Can we sit in silence and say quietly to ourselves a very simple but overwhelming truth?

God so loved Christopher McLaren that he gave his very own self.

God so loved (your name here).

God so loved the whole wide world including you.

God loved you, continues to love you and will always love you, even in your somewhat questionable shape. It really is an interesting proposition, this Christian way of life. Can you actually believe that your lovability is not in question?

Now I'm not exactly sure how to end this sermon, to tell you the truth. I feel a little bit like I should pull a Bishop Bailey and give you some spiritual homework. I think that each one of you here, old or young, short or tall, brilliant or just really smart, should memorize John 3:16. I'm serious. I'm telling a group of Episcopalians to memorize some scripture. Really, it won't hurt you. I would like to assign this memorization task.

"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. "

And once you've got it, I would like you to repeat it throughout your day as a kind of mantra, a holy repetitive motion to remind yourself of the central truth of the Christian faith. And I would like you to experiment as you go with replacing "the world" with your own name, and let the strangeness of it send your heart to

wondering. And if you want, you can put other people's names in there, people you love and people you hate, people who really irritate you and people you could fall in love with tomorrow. You can put other things in there to make the verse more interesting too: groups of people, mountain ranges, water-sheds, ethnic minorities, strange and exotic creatures, and then put yourself back into the mix and hopefully this silly and beautiful and profound spiritual practice will begin to get to you. Maybe for a few seconds you'll start to believe that God really does truly, madly, deeply love you, and that God's love is so wild it cannot be contained, it cannot be limited, it cannot be tamed.

There is an Easter Hymn that came to mind as I finished writing this sermon. I don't think we've ever really managed to sing it in church before, but one of my good friends from seminary loved this hymn and used to sing it in our life together.

The word *hilariter* means 'joyfully' in Latin, just so you know. I'm not going to sing the alleluias lest the Lenten liturgical police try to press charges. But I think this is a fitting ending to a sermon that celebrates the great mystery of God's love for all God has made including you.

The whole bright world rejoices now, Hilariter, hilariter!
The birds do sing on every bow, hilariter, hilariter
Then shout beneath the racing skies, Hilariter, hilariter!
To him who rose that we might rise, Hilariter, hilariter!

There is something hilarious, something joyful about this song and it is this: it celebrates the hilarious love of God.

For God so loved the world, all of it, including you. Can you believe it? I pray you will, more and more, as God's love and life expand within you.